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## **Narrative Forms of Adaptation, Retreat, and Mitigation in Richard Ford’s *Let Me Be Frank with You***

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**Abstract** This article examines narrative engagement with strange weather and rising waters in Richard Ford’s *Let Me Be Frank with You* (2014). It applies three terms from climate policy — adaptation, retreat, and mitigation — as heuristic concepts to approach the formal responses in the novel to a catastrophic event, Hurricane Sandy, while also considering the broader implications for the interplay between narrative form and radical climate change. The focus is on narrative forms such as catalogs, gaps in language and in the storyworld, and plotted instances of compassion. By drawing from environmental policy terms, this article suggests an analogy between how literary fiction functions and how human populations are described as behaving in the language of policy. Literature is adapting in formal terms to a changing climate; it is retreating from the effects of climate disruption, by way of a diluted language; and it is trying to find ways to soften and mitigate those effects — with mitigation approached in its first, now largely obsolete meaning of the word, as compassion. Exploring such analogies, this article emphasizes literary form’s participation in a broader discursive and material meshwork of human rela-

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tionships with the transforming environment, in dialogue with science and policy communications.

**Keywords** Hurricane Sandy, mitigation, adaptation, retreat, narrative form

This article examines narrative engagement with strange weather and rising waters in Richard Ford's *Let Me Be Frank With You* (2014). It applies three terms from climate policy – adaptation, retreat, and mitigation – as heuristic concepts with which to approach the formal responses in the novel to a catastrophic event – Hurricane Sandy – while also considering the broader implications for the interplay between narrative form and radical climate change. The primary focus is on the relevance of narrative forms such as lists and catalogues, gaps in language and in the storyworld, and plotted instances of compassion, for fictional representations of climate crisis. In addition to *Let Me Be Frank With You*, I refer briefly to other post-Sandy novels, including Beth Kephart's *This Is the Story of You* (2016) and Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013), as well as to a number of relevant policy documents such as New York City's *Vision 2020* (2011) and *A Stronger, More Resilient New York* (2014), and the most recent IPCC report (2018).

Recent work within the environmental humanities has shown a keen interest in the affordances and limits of literary fiction – and the form of the novel, in particular – for coming to terms with radical climate change. Amitav Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement* (2016), laments the lackluster response of literary fiction to the exigencies of climate change, while simultaneously calling attention to the limits of novelistic genres to mount such a response. Other scholars have similarly oscillated between a foregrounding of literature's (underperforming) potential and the highlighting of limits posed by its formal constraints (see e.g. Vermeulen 2018; Clark 2019: 78-110). Birgit Neumann notes that, while several researchers, including Adam Trexler, have foregrounded the interaction between radical climate change and questions of form in the contemporary novel, the discussion of form in their work tends to remain somewhat unspecified, with a focus on “generic innovations” rather than a more specific “attention to narrative forms” (Neumann 2019: 97). A notable exception is Ursula Heise's *Imagining Extinction*, which, while foregrounding literary fiction's limits in how it can represent complex crises acting out on planetary and geological scales, also points to new formal interventions, such as the use of the list, the pastiche, or the collage (Heise 2016). Such innovative use of form is arguably aligned with what Peter Boxall (Boxall 2013: 221) has called “a utopian urge ... the tendency of the contemporary novel to seek out new spatial and temporal

forms”, taking shape against the backdrop of increasingly grim prospects for the planetary future.

Richard Ford’s *Let Me Be Frank With You*, while no obvious candidate for “climate fiction” (if narrowly defined as focusing on anthropogenic climate change; see Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2018: 2), participates in a number of meaningful ways in this discussion of contemporary literature’s “struggle for genre” (LeMenager 2017: 222). It does so, I argue, through the imaginative adaptation of the catalogue; with its examples of retreat, on the part of language; in the way it offers a measure of mitigation by way of plotted instances of human empathy; and finally, by how it hovers, in formal terms, somewhere between a novel and collection of short stories, questioning clearly defined hierarchies of meaning or narrative closure. *Let Me Be Frank With You* (2014) describes the everyday aftermath of Sandy on the hard-hit New Jersey shore. It is the fourth book in Richard Ford’s Frank Bascombe series. The first three novels, often read as trilogy, have been predominantly examined in terms of suburb literature (see e.g. Knapp 2011), with Frank Bascombe as a (contested) American everyman (see e.g. Peinado Abarrio 2014a), or they have been approached from the perspective of the interplay between morality, identity and narrative in Ford’s fiction more generally (Duffy 2008). *Let Me Be Frank With You* has received comparatively little scholarly attention and has been largely overlooked in writings on responses to radical climate change.

Current approaches to contemporary literary form emphasize fiction’s close engagement with other fields of knowledge, and the ways in which literature interacts, in its thematic and formal features, with developments in science and policy (see Caracciolo 2019; Levine 2015; Vermeulen 2018). By drawing from environmental policy terms, this paper aims to suggest an analogy between how literary fiction as analysed here functions and how human populations are described as behaving in the language of policy. Literature is adapting in formal terms to a changing climate; it is retreating from the effects of climate disruption, by way of a diluted language, and it is trying to find ways to soften and to mitigate those effects – with “mitigation” approached in its first, now largely obsolete meaning of the word – as compassion. By exploring such analogies, I emphasize literary form’s intimate participation in a broader discursive and material meshwork of human relationships with the transforming environment, in dialogue with science and policy communications. I also hope to add to current climate policy research that examines the implications of policy terms for shaping discursive frames for policy and planning (see e.g. Schipper and Burton 2009; Fogelman and Bassett 2013; Arnall, Kothari and Kelman 2014).

## **Adaptation, retreat, and mitigation**

*Adaptation, retreat, and mitigation* belong to the key terms with which climate change has become bound up with private and public, individual and political decision-making, in policy documents, planning, climate science, as well as in the media. In how it is used in climate policy, *mitigation* denotes the actions humans can undertake to act on the causes of climate change, constraining the production of greenhouse gases, for example by “fuel switching ... changes in land use, reducing energy consumption and carbon sequestration.” (Grafton et al. 2012: 61) If *mitigation* denotes a proactive approach to the causes of radical climate change, adaptation focuses on human measures to come to terms with its effects. A particular sub-category of adaptation is retreat, which appeared already in the IPCC’s first report among the three categories of adaptive measures: “planned retreat, accommodation, protection” (Mimura 2010: 135). Over the past decades, all of these terms have to some degree become politicized and contested for how they are seen to frame what is desirable, necessary, or possible in terms of climate action. In recent climate policy, adaptation is often contrasted with mitigation (for an overview of how adaptation is used in climate change debate, see Pelling 2011: 8 ff.), and is seen by some as dangerously defeatist, and as legitimizing inaction on the part of mitigation. Such a stance is also visible in the literary fiction of climate change; Adam Trexler points out that, for most of the history of climate fiction, “[a]daptation remained all but unthinkable, because addressing it could undermine the apocalyptic rhetoric or concede political failure” (Trexler 2015: 236).

If the idea of adaptation is politicized, so too, and even more, is the idea of retreat (cf. McArdle 2014). Retreat, which includes withdrawal from vulnerable areas such as coastal cities exposed to flooding, tends to be filed under the category “doing nothing” (Mimura 2010: 135), with some suggesting it is a strategy that amounts to surrender, and contrasting it with the more active processes of mitigation, protection, or accommodation. In the most recent IPCC report, mitigation appears 61 times in the space of the 34-page summary for policymakers (IPCC 2018); adaptation is mentioned 74 times. Retreat, by contrast, is not mentioned. In New York City’s comprehensive plan *A Stronger, More Resilient New York* (2013), retreat is seen in militarized terms as a form of betrayal, with the city belligerently arguing that “[t]he city cannot, and will not, retreat.” (New York City 2013: 7; see also McArdle 2014: 40) The defiant tone is typical of policy statements within the context of cities at the American coastline. But in practice, some kind of planned retreat from the shores of New York is already taking place, with a “buyout program for ... vulnerable property owners that

will replace residential structures with wetlands and other natural buffers” (McArdle 2014: 46; see also Koslov 2016).

Contemporary literary fiction increasingly presents the reader with storyworlds in which characters, communities, and institutions are described as engaging with a changing environment. Characters are contemplating possible future climate catastrophe and forms of adaptation or mitigation, as do the protagonists in Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2014) and Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011); groups of scientists and policy makers work towards climate mitigation, as in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005; see Trexler 2015: 158) and are planning radical forms of climate adaptation, as in *New York 2140* (2017; see Ameel 2019a). Providing reflections on mitigation and adaptation is one of the crucial things done by contemporary fiction that thematizes climate; as Caren Irr argues, climate fiction condenses tendencies from activist fiction and Romantic nature writing “into a description of the effects of a dramatic change in the Earth’s climate on a particular location and a *vision of the options available to a population seeking to adapt to or mitigate those effects*” (Irr 2017; added emphasis).

Adaptation, retreat, and mitigation are not only tangible in what is described in the storyworld, but also in how literary form adapts itself to convey new relationships to a changing environment. In Beth Kephart’s *This is The Story of You* (2016), a young adult novel that examines the effect of Hurricane Sandy on a small coastal community in New Jersey, the opening chapters – set prior to the storm – see a group of teenagers working on their “four-year independent studies”, their “Project Flows”, structured around the key category “water”. The protagonist’s best friend Deni’s project, “Shore Up,” is focused on adaptation to radical climate change, with a mention, too, of mitigation of risks:

*Shore Up*. That was Deni’s Project Flow. Dams, dikes, levees, green-blue corridors, sea gates, surge control, blue dunes, oyster reefs, wrap the city of Manhattan in plastic, float Venice on buoys.

Do something.

Mitigate the risks.

Do not disappear. (Kephart 2016: 15-16)

The climate adaptation measures introduced in the novel resonate with high-profile adaptive solutions proposed in the media and policy for coastal cities, and for New York City in particular, such as man-made oyster reefs (proposed in New York’s comprehensive waterfront plan; see New York City 2011: 79-80), or Bjarne Ingels firm BIG’s idea to encapsulate southern Manhattan in a protective shell (“wrap the city of

Manhattan in plastic”). The gradually expanding list, buoying out from individual nouns to independent clauses, gives a sense of almost infinite range of possible efforts to adapt to rising water. The list-like enumeration is found also in the description of the other Project Flow projects in the novel (7, 15). In its snappiness, the list aims to convey the somewhat disjointed and impatient way of speaking and thinking associated with teenagers; the ”pandemonium of random impressions” and more generally the ”lack of coherence [that] is the very token of a young person’s state of mind” that young adult fiction sets out to convey (see Nikolajeva 2014: n.p.). The list-like rendering is indicative not only of a chaotic state of mind, and of an indefinite set of challenges and possible adaptive measures, but also of a chaotic state of the world. When Hurricane Sandy strikes,<sup>1</sup> the ensuing chaos is conveyed in long lists that describe the destruction on the beach:

planks, tables, porch boards, rooftops, a pair of rubber tires, hangers with their dresses on, particles of window frames, a charcoal grill.

The empty shelves of a pantry.

The hats of lamps.

A chest of drawers.

A keg of beer.

My mother’s apron.

*My mother’s apron.*

The sand was a trash heap.

The sand was for pickers.

Parts of us were out there. (91-92)

The list goes on in the following pages (92-93); and it is notable that the line ”Parts of us were out there” can be read in two ways, either referring to survivors gathering on the beach (as ”pickers” and ”scavengers”), or referring to the ”trash heap” on the beach as parts of the disjointed lives of the inhabitants, a scattered whole the narrator is trying to assemble again, with the list as first tentative narrative strategy in that direction.

The brief excerpt from *This is The Story of You* exemplifies how literary fiction does not only reflect on climate disruption in its thematics, but also modulates its formal features to provide sense-making narrative strategies in tune with the chaos and contingency of a changing world. Such an approach towards literary form’s interaction with environmental disruption aligns with recent studies that have been inspired in part by Caroline Levine’s seminal book *Forms*, such as by Pieter Vermeulen (2018: 10),

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<sup>1</sup> Hurricane Sandy is never named in the novel, although the text is literally ”sandy” in how it thematizes sand as non-human actor.

who, in his study of *Station Eleven*, argues that “[l]iterary engagements with climate change are invested ... in exploring novel configurations of life and form”, or Marco Caracciolo’s study “Form, Science, and Narrative in the Anthropocene” (2019). Of course, literary form – seen here, following Levine, as literary “patterns of repetition and difference” (2015: 13), from meter to novelistic plot – does not *adapt* and *retreat* in the way coastal communities change their living habits or move to higher grounds in the face of radical climate change. And literary form cannot *mitigate* climate change in the way we can by switching to renewable energy or a more sustainable diet. And yet literary form can display *adaptation* of existing language and narrative strategies, such as the list, in its responses to climate change, and, as will be explored below, it can even exhibit a marked sense of *retreat* on the part of language in the way threatening futures are imagined.

In media and policy texts, adaptation, retreat and mitigation tend to be seen in terms of financial costs and possible risks, visualized in flood maps, graphs, and quantitative measurements. Examples from media and policy include the IPCC’s use of the term “carbon budget” (IPCC), or Citigroup’s 2015 report on the economic cost of global warming, or again the warning, in media, that rising waters would cost “trillions of dollars” (Abraham 2018). A novel such as Nathaniel Rich’s *Odds Against Tomorrow* mimics – and satirizes – such language used in finance and insurance (see also Bergthaller 2018: 117). What unnerves people and institutions, in Rich’s novel, are not the material conditions, or the real effects of catastrophe on lives, communities, and civilization, but rather the figures and numbers that denote risk in financial terms – financial settlements based on insurance policies. Such a position mirrors real-life responses to radical climate change: a recent study focusing on the aftermath of Sandy in New York concluded that for inhabitants of at-risk shores, the flood map – an abstraction visualising future risk – was perceived as “scarier than another storm” (Elliott 2018). In Richard Ford’s *Let Me Be Frank With You* (2014), it is not the spectre of a future storm that drives people from their homes, but the prospect of “the new flood maps issued by fuckin’ Obama’s lackeys” (49).

If the current crisis is a “crisis of the imagination” (Ghosh 2016), it is notable that in the case of *Odds Against Tomorrow*, fictional language turns to technical, financial, legal, and insurance discourses for models to bring the reader nearer to the future. This appropriation of financial language can be seen as a mode for critiquing such language, but also as an infection of the novelistic voice by financial and utilitarian discourses that naturalize and normalize highly problematic modes of framing radical climate change in terms of its monetized costs. But other forms of adaptation

are possible – including modulations of narrative form that gesture toward chaos and contingency, and toward an inability to assign coherent meaning (let alone to ascribe quantifiable measurements) to chaotic events. *Let Me Be Frank With You* explores some of these possibilities.

### **A Forest of Signs**

In *Let Me Be Frank With You*, the adaptability of novelistic language for narrating catastrophe is evident in the catalogue-like description the protagonist and narrator Frank gives of the devastated landscape of the New Jersey coastline early in the text. There is a similarity to Kephart's book and the list-like description of destruction on the shore, but the focalizer here is more learned and mature, and the things enumerated in *Let Me Be Frank With You* are not objects, but already textual signs referring to a complex set of meanings. In the opening story, Frank visits the pummelled shore that is the site of his former home, a house he has sold and he is now going to visit together with the current disgruntled owner. There is an awkwardness to the scene quite typical of Frank's encounters in the book. This awkwardness stems in part from the protagonist's being confronted with unfinished remnants from his own past in a way that is also infused with a sense of ill-defined guilt, in this case toward the present house-owner who is ruined by Sandy. The scene is also important in that it is the novel's first extended description of the effect of hurricane Sandy on the landscape – an effect that lingers continuously on the background of the thoughts, speculations, and conversations of the characters. The spectacle that greets Frank on the shore is rendered in the form of a disparate list of textual signs:

LOOTERS BEWARE! A sign on the shoulder of the exit curve warns all who'd enter and do ill. A skull 'n' cross-bones has been painted on in red to drive the point home. CURFEW 6 PM THIS MEANS U! fills out the space to make it personal. A forest of other signs is sprouted around like political yard art, announcing, WE'LL BUY YOUR HOUSE (OR WHAT'S LEFT OF IT). MARTELLO BROTHERS – REFUSE HAULING. HABLA INGLES-RAPIDO! HABLA INGLES-RAPIDO! LEARN GRIEF COUNSELING IN TEN DAYS. FAST MOLD REMOVAL. KNOW YOUR RIGHTS. WRITERS' COOPERATIVE. NRA ICE-BREAKER AT THE TOMS RIVER HAMPTON INN. A DRUNK DRIVER KILLED MY DAUGHTER. FLOW YOGA. TANTRIC SEX WORKSHOP. FIRST RESPONDERS SPAGHETTI SUPPER. One sign merely says NOTHING BESIDE REMAINS (for victims with a liberal arts degree). (24-25)

The enumeration of these textual responses to the hurricane is telling, first, for its adaptation of the form of the catalogue; and second, for its reference (in



the final sign mentioned, and thus heavy with summarising meaning) to P.B. Shelley's most renowned sonnet "Ozymandias" in the quote "NOTHING BESIDE REMAINS".<sup>2</sup> "Ozymandias" is, of course, famous among other as a contemplation of the evanescence and pretences of human civilization and as a shorthand for human hubris. For current future-oriented ecocritical writings, it is relevant also for the way it uses the device of the future reader, "... a posthumous reader who remains to read the traces left by civilization" (Vermeulen 2017: 872) to make sense of the ruins of civilization against a sweeping temporary scale. In Shelley's "Ozymandias" the posthumous reader is also a narrator: there is a "traveller from an antique land" as well as the poetic I to interpret the ruinous signs. But Frank in *Let Me Be Frank With You* is not so sure about contemporaneous readers' abilities to read such signs: the narrator explicitly foregrounds that few will be able to detect the reference ("for victims with a liberal arts degree"). And the author seems uncertain that his intended audience will have picked up the reference, either, since he feels the need to provide the key a few pages later, as the protagonist passes "the message from Ozymandias." (29)

The interplay among signs, readability, and the power(lessness) of narration is bound up in this passage with the formal device of the catalogue. (153) Jan Alber sees among two of the three functions of lists in postmodern literature, first, to "serve a metafictional or self-reflexive function" (2016: 343), and second, to "highlight the limits of our compulsive need to impose order on chaos" (2016: 343).<sup>3</sup> Alber links these attributes of postmodern lists to postmodern irony, playfulness, and a gesturing toward meaninglessness. But in more recent examples from early twenty-first century literature, lists have also been used as newly sincere attempts to come to terms with the ontological and epistemological uncertainties raised by indeterminate futures. The list can be understood as a device to flatten hierarchies; the influence of Bruno Latour's work within environmentally concerned literary studies can in part be seen in a heightened attention to lists, or to what have been called "Latour litanies" (Bogost 2012: 49-50), "quasi- surrealist lists of disparate entities ... that convey, through their promiscuous entanglement and equanimous copresence, the equal footing of nonhuman and human actors" (Felski 2015: 738). Ursula Heise notes in *Imagining Extinction* that in recent fiction imagining species collapse, catalogues provide a formal response with which to render current "elegiac impulses"

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<sup>2</sup> Other intertextual references may be inferred; the warning sign to "all who enter" is reminiscent of Dante's line "abandon all hope, you who enter here" from Canto III.

<sup>3</sup> The third feature of the catalogue identified by Alber, its presumed celebration of variety and plurality, seems to me less convincing and also less helpful in the context of the kinds of catalogues and lists discussed here.

combined with an “enumerative drive” in our relation to extinction (2016: 56). Lists can also offer a way of expressing the scalar disjuncture and derangement brought on by climate change, as happens for example in Jane Bennett’s multi-scalar lists of things in *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Lists in this context, then, are no mere evocations of meaningless play, but rather, can provide “a way of expressing environmental concern” (Heise 2016: 61) in a way that is hard to achieve in more conventional narrative form.

The catalogue describing the “forest of signs,” while considerably incongruous, does not provide an entirely random list of items. Rather, it moves toward some tentative interpretations of our reading of a world under threat of future disruptions. The signs are read in terms of America’s polarized political climate (“like political yard art”) and several of them draw on the language of profit and insurance noted above, and promise to cash in, in some way or another, on the catastrophe (“WE’LL BUY YOUR HOUSE” / “REFUSE HAULING”), in a way that is aligned also to the focalizer’s perspective of a retired real estate agent. The opening sign – LOOTERS BEWARE – is a warning that even though the hurricane has left a changed world, this is not a commons yet, and that scavenging – as Crusoe would, or the “pickers” on the New Jersey beach in Beth Kephart’s *This Is the Story of You* – will not remain unpunished. And while there is a measure of coherence to this disparate list of signs, with the final reference to Ozymandias providing one way of framing all of these signs as a warning against hubris and the ephemeral nature of all human acts, the dominant effect is that of a chaos of multifarious signs, commensurate with the form’s characteristic strategy of critiquing the compulsion “to impose order on chaos” (Alber 2016: 343). For Frank, crucially, the inability to read the landscape is not so much related to reading signs of the past (as the reference to Ozymandias would first suggest) but is rather associated with an inability to read the meaning of the future. Just before presenting the catalogue, Frank warns the reader that he is unable to see the future of this area he knows so well: “I should be able to envision the grains of possibility in what’s left of it [Ortley Beach, N.J.]. But for the moment, I cannot.” (24) The catalogue can be seen as an evocation of this inability. Brian McHale points out that “[f]rom the ontological point of view, catalogues are paradoxical. On the one hand, they can appear to assert the full presence of a world [...] Yet at the same time, the decontextualization of words through the catalogue structure can have the opposite effect, that of evacuating language of presence [...]” (1987: 153). In the catalogue of signs at the New Jersey shore, we see such a *retreat* of language (“evacuating language of presence”), something I will return to below.

Western literature has a long tradition of finding meaning in what is washed up on the beach (see Doody [1996] 1998: 320-326). But Frank Bascombe sees little in the “forest of signs” left in the wake of Sandy to rebuild, and less to make sense of. The narrator deems this inability to understand signs in one’s environment as typical for the dawning era in which he finds himself. In the final story, Frank finds “[...] in the crusty grass [...] someone’s upper plate – as intimate and shocking as a human body part. Who knows who’d left it there – as a joke, out of frustration, as an act of vengeance, or just as a sign of things to come that can’t at this late stage in civilization be interpreted.” (206) The remains of something almost, but not really, human is, like much else Frank encounters, ultimately a sign pointing toward a future that cannot be comprehended in the language currently available: “a sign of things to come that can’t at this late stage in civilization be interpreted.”

### **Retreat in diluted language**

The use of the list, and the reference to Ozymandias, in *Let Me Be Frank With You*, both underscore the problematic limits of language and narrative for expressing the changing world under the shadow of increasingly uncertain futures. One related strategy visible in the novel is that of a *retreat* of sorts in the formal responses to strange weather and rising waters, akin to the evacuation of language and its presence in the form of the catalogue. By “retreat,” I do not mean that fictional language retreats into idiosyncrasies. Rather, what I have in mind is a retreat within a more formal plane: language itself shedding its skin, self-imposing a program of austerity in the face of world-threatening changes, moving to higher ground: literary fiction weeding out vocabulary, leaving gaps at sentence level, or lacunae in the narration. Peter Boxall sees in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) a form of “end of language” that looks back to formal experimentation of the first half of the twentieth century -- to Beckett, in particular (Boxall 2013: 219). Similar conclusions could be drawn from Colson Whitehead’s depiction of the “crafting [of a] ... new language” after an apocalyptic “last night” in *Zone One* (2011: 79; see Sorensen 2014: 563-564). Richard Ford’s *Let Me Be Frank With You* displays some (admittedly restrained) hints of a similar formal retreat. In the novel, the protagonist repeatedly returns to the idea of weeding out vocabulary. In the opening short story, he notes how he has begun to compile “a personal inventory of words that, in my view, should no longer be usable – in speech or any form” (5), and, in the final short story, he tells his wife Sally: “I’ve been decommissioning polluted words

out of my vocabulary lately. You may not have noticed. I'm keeping an inventory" (193). There is an intimation that this process stems from his aging (and the nearing spectre of death), or that it goes back to a "secret grief" (194), a sense of entering "late life" as well as a culture defined by old age and lateness (cf. Boxall 2013: 24-25). But there is also a sense that the prime mover behind these (as behind so many other phenomena in the book) is Hurricane Sandy and the effects it has had on the environment, everyday life, and the language at one's disposal.

Vocabulary starts to have gaps; words have become "polluted" and need to be "decommissioned" to keep up with a world that becomes scarcer, in which an exponentially growing range of species are facing extinction. Retreat is suggested in formal features of the text, in the form of the catalogue and the intimation of a scarcer vocabulary, but also acted out on the thematic level, in descriptions of events within the storyworld: "No one wants to stay any place. There are species-level changes afoot" (73), observes Frank. Throughout the book, there are suggestions that humans might want to apply such an act of erasure also to themselves, retreating from the endangered coast or disappearing altogether. Frank had already moved to higher ground before disaster struck. Witnessing the devastation visited by Hurricane Sandy on his former beach house, he imagines a disaster tourist asking himself: "What can you do with this now? Let it settle back to nature? Walk away and come back in a year or ten? Move to Nova Scotia? Shoot yourself?" (30-31). The brief quotation offers several options for retreat from the vulnerable shore, ending suggestively with the ultimate one: death by suicide – a suggestion that is made repeatedly throughout the book. Frank, thinking about "all the animal species that were on the planet when I was born and that are still around", and how "[p]retty soon they won't be", concludes: "It's probably a good time to be checking out." (96) The message is conveyed more clearly by Frank's school-time acquaintance, Eddie Medley, who delivers a suicidal prophecy on the local radio: "We have to clear our desks and get out of the way. [...] That's what this goddam hurricane's telling us." (180)

And there are not only gaps in language or suggestions of people getting "out of the way;" in the novel, a sense of catastrophe creates an intimation of gaps in the storyworld, too. At the pummelled shore, Frank Bascombe considers that "it's easy to see how a person could drive down on a reconnoitring mission and simply never show up again; as if calamity had left a hole in the world on the rim of which everything civilized and positive-tending teeters – spirits, efforts, hopes, dreams, memories ... buildings, for sure – all in jeopardy of spiralling down and down." (31) This intimation of "a hole in the world" opening up, of sudden ontological gaps and

absences, links *Let Me Be Frank With You* with a range of contemporary texts that aim to come to terms with uneasy ontologies, novels arising from as diverse contexts as Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2010), which sees a giant tiger rummaging underneath New York and titanic conceptual art work creating artificial fjords and chasms in the built environment, to the holes opening up in the unhinged Finnish capital Helsinki in Mikko Rimminen's *Pölkky* ("Woodblock"; 2007; see Ameel 2019b) or the disappearing Australian towns in Shaun Prescott's *The Town* (2017).

These absences, in turn, make visible the presence of a newly forming ontology. The idea of absence as presence occurs in Ford's book in the context of the mundane, (161) but also, crucially, on the shore, where the absence of houses in the wake of Sandy has physically brought into focus the presence of ocean and beach: "All four other houses down Poincinet are simply missing, leaving *only* vacant cellars like my old place. Though opening up the space these houses so recently occupied has reconfigured a new pretty vista – ocean and beach the way they used to be, time immemorial." (33; original emphasis) Absence opens up new presences; vistas are reconfigured. "Up the beach, opened by the absence of what were people's houses, the sight line stretches all the way up to Ortleigh Beach and beyond ..." (34) The idea of absence as opening up, reconfiguring, and making present space in disconcerting ways can be connected in early twenty-first century American literature with the legacy of 9/11 and the resonance of the fallen towers (see e.g. Rounds 2015; Wilhite 2016: 6). But it quickly became a trope that not only looked back to considerations of the legacy of 9/11, but also broadened into considerations of other kinds of sense of threat and future uncertainties in novels that only tangentially referred to the attacks, such as in Teju Cole's *Open City*.<sup>4</sup> In Ben Lerner's *10:04*, the "present absence" of the towers (2014: 108) "seems to have already lost its singularity. What defines the experience [...] is the normality of the abnormal, in particular when set against the threat of ecological crises" (Salmela and Ameel 2016: 329). In *Let Me Be Frank With You*, the sudden absence of houses is not only a powerful reminder of the evanescence of human endeavours (in line with Ozymandias's warning), but suggests that such endeavours have been an intrusion on a world that, with the hurricane, "[...] effortlessly, almost sweetly, [...] re-asserts its claim and becomes itself again." (34)

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<sup>4</sup> Charlie Lee-Potter has shown how Richard Ford, in his editing of the third Frank Bascombe book *The Lay of the Land* (2006), has moved from references to 9/11 toward more ecological and environmental threats, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (Lee-Potter 2017: 63), thus anticipating some of the themes of *Let Me Be Frank With You*.

If the absences described above are for the most part located within the storyworld rather than in the text's formal features, gaps and holes are also evident in the generic properties of *Let Me Be Frank With You*. The Frank Bascombe books (widely read as completed trilogy following the publication of *The Lay of the Land* in 2006) were always determined by multiple absences: that of the deceased son; that of the "absence of coherent selfhood." (Duffy 2008: 160) But the well-ordered form of the trilogy gave the appearance of a "coherent novelistic enterprise" (Peinado Abarrio 2014b: n.p.) even as coherence and closure were lacking within the storyworld. The publication of *Let Me Be Frank With You* shows not only that there is no closure for Frank's self-narration, but also throws into question the conclusive form and coherence of the Bascombe series (published in a single volume in the Everyman Library just five years earlier). *Let Me Be Frank With You* challenges generic classifications in terms of prose novel and novella: presented as a collection of four separate stories, it can perfectly be read as a novel in four chapters. Each of the four novellas can be read independently, but the blank pages between the different texts – and the gaps between this book and the previous titles in the series – make tentative new presences visible, inviting the reader to draw connections between the different stories, and between this book and the preceding trilogy.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, within the storyworld, Frank has to negotiate the absences created by the Hurricane and by the traumas in his own past, while simultaneously being drawn into imagining connections between his own past and the lives of the strangers he meets.

### **Mitigation as compassion**

Adaptation of language provides one way to come to terms with the epistemological and ontological uncertainties posed by strange weather and fickle futures. When such adaptation takes on the form of diluted language, of the intimation of absences opening up in the storyworld, or of vacating language and meaning in the catalogue, they can be described as forms of retreat. But is it possible to speak of *mitigation* in how literary fiction engages with uncertain ontologies? In climate policy, mitigation constitutes "a unique policy area because it requires a multi-scalar response" (Coolidge 2019: np). It connects the local and the global, since "mitigation costs are typically local ... [and] benefits are mainly global." (Rosen-

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<sup>5</sup> One such connection is provided by the Christmas ending in *Let Me Be Frank With You*, which creates a powerful counterpoint to the Good Friday beginning in *The Sportswriter* (1986), the first book in the series.

zweig et al. 2018: 106) This is true on the policy level, but also on the level of individual agency, where mitigating measures connect to broader fields of political and communal action across vast geographical and temporal scales. Acts of mitigation assume some investment with what is faraway, or unknown, a willingness to bring together what is close and what is distant – spatially, temporally, and cognitively. Intriguingly, in its more general meaning, the term is bound up with a sense of guilt and responsibility: it denotes the “extenuation [...] of an offence, fault, etc.; abatement or minimization of the loss or damage resulting from a wrongful act”.<sup>6</sup>

One unexpected implication of the term *mitigation* arises when we consider that its first recorded meaning – now largely obsolete – is that of (Godly) “Compassion, mercy, favour”.<sup>7</sup> Examining narrative form through the prism of mitigation as compassion – and with associations of unexpected connectivity with what is distant – draws the attention to moments when narrative progression unfolds as “[s]uffering together with another”, as “participation in suffering”,<sup>8</sup> providing an important corollary to the narrative forms of adaptation and retreat observed above. Mitigation-as-compassion, and as integral part of narrative progression, is not equated here with the description of characters helping others. In *Let Me Be Frank With You*, Frank’s wife Sally is described as “counselling grieving hurricane victims, something she’s been doing for weeks.” (70) But while this instance describes acts of empathy (in the everyday sense of the word), there is little sense that the narration gains broader meaning from them. In the novel there are, however, a few brief moments when the narrative progression builds up towards a moment of revelatory compassion between near-strangers who learn they are connected in grief in unforeseen ways. In such instances, the plot can be seen as structured toward a recognition, not of suspended meaning, but of the presence of a shared plight, a shared humanity. While the recognition of such connections dawns on the thematic level of the storyworld, it is also reflected in the generic form of the short story collection, which, with its gaps between the different novellas and its break with the earlier format of the trilogy, invites connections to be drawn, while defying clear closure.

The second story of the book revolves around the meeting with an unknown woman Frank finds on his doorstep, and on the revelation of what this encounter means. The woman announces herself as a “hurricane victim” (89), thus suggesting a serendipitous role for her somewhere

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<sup>6</sup> Oxford English Dictionary 2021, s.v. “mitigation.”

<sup>7</sup> Oxford English Dictionary 2021, s.v. “mitigation.”

<sup>8</sup> Oxford English Dictionary 2021, s.v. “compassion.”

in the chain of causalities connecting the hurricane and various strange appearances in the book. Frank is otherwise a spectator to other victims' stories, but here he is literally drawn in. The narrative moves towards a slow, explicit revelation. Frank at one point suggests that "[t]his feels like it's heading for a climax," with the woman confirming: "Yes [...] There *is* a climax." (102; original emphasis) The woman has formerly lived in the same house, and the carefully wrought revelation, in the end, of a family drama in the cellar of the house, resonates also with the sense of loss Frank feels for his deceased son, a loss that forms a tragic undertow throughout the book. Compassion here revolves around simple bodily gestures: the simple handshakes with which the encounter between Frank and the woman begin and end; the momentary silence that applies when one experiences, as Frank puts it, "significant life events for which no words or obvious gestures apply." (109)

This moment of compassion, of a connection in suffering that gradually unfolds between the protagonist and this unfamiliar other, lacks clear political or societal consequences, and this may well be one of its crucial characteristics. Hannah Arendt, in her study of compassion, writes that compassion "can comprehend only the particular, but has no notion of the general and no capacity for generalization." ([1963] 1965: 85) Similar to passion, the language of compassion for Arendt "consists in gestures and expressions of countenance rather than in words. [...] Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence." ([1963] 1965: 86) The handshake in *Let Me Be Frank With You*, awkward and yet sincere, is a sign of such distances being abolished. If the forms of adaptation and retreat discussed above are focusing on an evacuation of presence and a questioning of the possibility of narrative meaning, what emerges from these instances of mitigation is a sense of shared presence. Such meaning is suggested as much by the events in the storyworld itself as by the blank pages that introduce and end this novella, and that point across such gaps to a range of other, similar instances of the protagonist's encounter with strangers or estranged loved ones. And as Frank is invited (or allowed) to enter this presence of a shared grief with an unfamiliar human, so, too, there is an opening for readers to insert their own presence.

For readers, future and present, the engagement with rising water as examined here by way of terms from climate policy – adaptation, retreat, mitigation – conveys some of the limits and the possibilities of narrative engagements with strange weather and environmental disruptions. It can be considered as exemplary of how contemporary environmentally themed



literature performs what Birgit Neumann has called “a ‘minor’ politics” that is “committed to imagining new modes of thinking and being in the world while gesturing toward the limited purchase of contemporary fiction.” (Neumann 2019: 98) In *Let Me Be Frank With You*, forms of *adaptation* apply existing language and narrative strategies, such as the catalogue, to come to terms with uncertain futures. The effect may amount to a more deeply running scepticism toward sense-making strategies and the possibilities of language. In the form of narrative *retreat* such scepticism infects narrative form itself, suggesting holes in the ontological world, and the weeding out of vocabularies, noting absences that inevitably point towards renewed presences: the appearance of the non-human world against all odds: “ocean and beach the way they used to be, time immemorial.” (Ford 2014: 33) Following Hannah Arendt, *mitigation* understood as compassion shuns the domain of the political in favor of simple bodily gestures, an abolishment of distance between strangers. In doing so, it offers a potentially redemptive moment of presence that may also include the tentative inclusion of the reader. In such instances, the text itself can be seen as performing a compassionate intervention within a discursive landscape of environmental disruption that tends to be largely dominated by non-fiction focused on risks and financial costs, or fictional narratives with dystopian undercurrents.

All this may at first suggest that literary form in contemporary fiction is primarily concerned with distancing itself from the world, reaffirming literature’s referential aporia in grappling with pressing real-world matters (cf. Zapf 2016: 245), through retreat in language, or a narrated compassion that appears stripped of political implications. But other readings are possible, pointing to the enduring possibilities of the novelistic form to come to terms with radical challenges. In the face of climate change, the affordances and limitations of the prose novel have increasingly come under closer scrutiny. Adam Trexler, for example, notes how the novel’s grounding in bourgeois spaces limits its ability to think of the complex scales of climate change. (2015: 79; see Mehnert 2016: 227-8) As noted in the introduction to this paper, literary fiction that engages with climate change has arguably become involved in a “struggle for genre, ... the struggle to find new patterns of expectation and new means of living with an unprecedented set of living conditions.” (LeMenager 2017: 222) The increasing visibility of climate fiction, defined as “a distinctive body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change,” (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2018: 2) bears witness to the manifold shapes this struggle for new form is taking. Seen in this light, the indeterminate generic properties of Richard Ford’s book display some of the continuing formal flexibility of prose fiction. As outlined above, *Let Me Be Frank With You* is somewhere

between a prose novel and a set of disparate short stories; as a disjointed fourth book of what was considered a finished trilogy, it questions the possibility of closure or a clear-cut hierarchy of meaning. In Beth Kephart's *This Is the Story of You*, the other Sandy novel briefly discussed here, there are several elements, rendered in italics to set them apart formally from the rest of the text, that undermine a clear narrative hierarchy: these include a form of narrative chorus or a communal voice set aside from the protagonist's perspective (see e.g. 109); the writings of the protagonist's little brother about his multi-local collection of sand (118-119); an extract from Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* (18); the inclusion of indigenous oral storytelling, and the Seminole Nation legend of the Blue Heron in particular. (135) All point to competing kinds of knowledge about human relationships to a changing world.

Forms, as Caroline Levine reminds us, "matter [...], because they shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context" (2015: 5). The partial breakdown of language and narrative form can act as a reminder of the limits both to our vocabulary and cognitive capacities faced with the scalar complexities of multiple uncertain futures, with future losses visible in our present language. And while for the characters within the storyworld, brief moments of compassion are arguably outside of the political, this doesn't have to be true for the effect on the reader, for whom instances of emplotted compassion may provide a powerful sense of shared humanity across temporal or spatial boundaries, as well as an articulation of the unspoken loss and grief that have become one of the dominants in thinking of uncertain ecological and climatic futures.

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