

# LOOMING

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In 2023, the Compact of Free Association between the US and the Federated States of Micronesia will end. As everyone in Yap State—one of the four States that comprise the Federated States of Micronesia—knows and fears, the end of Compact funding will have devastating consequences for education, infrastructure, and health care. In the case of health care alone, US funding supports 95% of the country’s health care budget, which as it stands, barely maintains the delivery of the notably substandard care that islanders are able to receive. The end of the Compact will also spell the end to a majority of government services unless other sources of income to support the state can be found (Throop 2014). It also means an end to accessing US aid in the aftermath of disasters like the ones that have been brought by the steadily rising sea levels and increasing number of Super Typhoons that have either threatened or hit Yap over the last few decades (Throop 2020). 2023 has, in light of such realities, been nicknamed the “coming funeral” by many Yapese. As his Excellency Ambassador Masao Nakayama, who once served as the Federated States of Micronesia’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations has put it, “even the dead are no longer safe in my country” (Blakemore 2009).

How can we understand a future in which even the dead are no longer safe? What does it mean to be waiting for a future that is experienced as a “coming funeral”? I would like to begin to trace the phenomenological contours of such a mode of existence with a phenomenon that I have been ruminating upon of late, the experience of *looming*. To do so, I will explore the existential shape of looming by shifting from Yap’s pending crisis, which first prompted my thinking on the matter, to the still unfolding situation that has brought the phenomenon of looming into much sharper relief: the slow encroachment of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has gradually and unevenly emerged as an unprecedented global event radically reshaping our possibilities for being and being-together in our contemporary historical moment. 2020, much like 2023, is a year defined by its own unique form of looming.

## THE PRACTICE

As a Canadian ex-pat living in Southern California, it felt good to be at the rink to watch my son Jonah at his first post-holiday practice with his travel hockey team—the California Golden Bears. Less than a week after New Year, everyone seemed happy to be back, watching their sons and daughters playing a game we all loved. One exception, however, was Nate. Nate’s son, Bean, played goaltender on one of the other Bear’s Mites teams. Usually friendly and talkative, today Nate looked tired, pale, and listless. He had a hoodie covering his head and made it a point to keep his distance from the small group of parents who had gathered together to catch up with each other on the events of the holiday while watching their children play. Standing on the fringe of their discussion, and close enough to Nate that it seemed odd not to strike up a conversation with him, I asked how his holiday had been. Nate simply shook his head. “It was horrible. I was so sick. I missed out on Christmas and New Year’s and everything.” His voice was noticeably weakened and raspy. In bed for over a week with a 103-degree fever, a horrible cough and tightness in his chest, he recounted that at times he had a hard time catching his breath. He was so weak he was simply unable to get out of bed, even for the most basic of needs. So sick, in fact, that his wife had to call a medic to come for a home visit to check on him. The medic was so concerned about the fever and possible dehydration that he gave Nate an IV drip right there on spot. Thinking it was just a bad case of the flu, however, the medic told him there was nothing much more he could do. Nate would just have to ride the virus out.

Nate went on to tell me that it was the sickest he had ever been in his life, “and man, I never get sick. I’m almost 40 years old and I haven’t had the flu since I was a teenager!” Having just read a few stories online about a developing situation in China where a mysterious “novel pneumonia” that had afflicted dozens of people, an almost laughable thought emerged—“Could *this* be *that*?” Almost laughable with a stress on the *almost*. Lingering in the margins of my consciousness, the hesitation of that *almost*, would take hold me yet again, even long after our conversation had ended, whenever new information on the “novel flu in China” would come my way. “I am so sorry to hear that Nate,” I said, letting the brief thought of the news of a distant “new flu” fade into the background of my awareness. We both turned again to watch the practice, just as Jonah tried out a high wrist shot on Bean who caught the puck with a nice glove save.

## ALMOST ALREADY HERE

In terms of its etymology, the English term looming has a hazy origin, perhaps derived from either Low German or Dutch, where terms like *luemen* (to be weary) and *lomen* (to move slowly), capture qualities of a *lumbering drawn out movement-toward* that the contemporary term still very much evokes. Indeed, as the Oxford University Press Online Dictionary defines it, *to loom* is to “appear as a vague form, especially one that is large or threatening.” Looming may also refer, however, to a more specific event that is “regarded as threatening

. . . and about to happen.” Such qualities of threatening vagueness, pending aboutness, slow encroachment, and gradual revealing are also tied to the nominal form, where *loom* is used to indicate “a vague and often exaggerated first appearance of an object seen in darkness or fog, especially at sea” or “the dim reflection by a cloud or haze of light which is not directly visible, e.g., from a lighthouse over the horizon” (Oxford University Press Online Dictionary, n.d.).

Throughout this definitional range are consistent references to threatening or unsettling forms of appearing, emergence, and approach that are clouded by hazy and indistinct horizons. To say that something is looming is to recognize that something, while still yet indefinite in form, is imposing its impending presence upon us. To speak of the type of *not yet* that defines a looming future, is thus to recognize the saturated and weighed down arrival of a foreboding reality that has already somehow taken form and has, accordingly, already partially penetrated the present, even despite its hazy hovering just beyond our reach. Just beyond our reach, looming is, in this respect, not only the *yet to come*, but in some respect also the already somehow *almost here*.

What’s felt to be the inevitable coming into being of what looms fills the horizon of our future possibilities. What looms is thus resonant with the “gloomy disposition” toward an immanent actuality that Adolf Reinach (2016 [1916]) described in his brief analysis of the experiences of foreboding that he encountered on the battlefield during WWI (25). Much like in Reinach’s account of the young officer who had given his remaining possessions and a farewell letter to a friend before being killed at the front, what’s felt to be the inevitable coming into being of what looms fills the horizon of our future possibilities (25). Such a future engulfs and effectively eviscerates such possibilities, however, through its very approach. The form of possibility that defines a future that looms is thus one that is defined by a palpable sense of pending actualization. This is, in short, a coming into being of a dreaded future whose *not yet* is marked by a soon coming to be.

## MEETING

About a month following my talk with Nate at the rink, I had gathered with the other department chairs for our monthly Social Science Chair’s meeting with our Dean. People seemed in good spirits and there were a number of friendly conversations happening as we lined up for our pre-meeting coffee, tea, and cookies in our familiar gathering place—a conference room on the second floor of Murphy Hall. Taking my seat, coffee in hand, I remember smiling as our Dean tried, without much success at first, to get everyone’s attention. While the agenda covered a range of issues relevant for our division within the college, including a long-anticipated discussion of newly proposed budget model for the university, the Dean began the meeting with a brief announcement about the novel coronavirus that was gaining increasing prominence in the news. He had already been involved in a few meetings with university leadership about the virus and he wanted us to know that while there was nothing to be worried about *as of yet*, that the university was

keeping a close eye on the situation and was in the process of making contingency plans if the situation happened to develop into something more serious than it currently was. As I walked back to my office in Haines Hall with notes on what to report back to our faculty at our next meeting in hand, my chest felt heavy, my mood slightly depressed. I tried to shift my thoughts elsewhere without much success. Looking back, it is clear to me that the first press of a looming pandemic that was already in the process of becoming had begun to seriously take its hold on me.

At this point in early February, the first deaths had already been reported in Wuhan province and China had confirmed that the new “mystery illness” could be spread between humans. On January 20, 2020, I had read a story from CNN confirming the human-to-human spread of the disease (Christensen and Senthilingham 2020) that was posted on the “Yap Development” Facebook page, a group I belong to and check on regularly. The group had initially been made to help organize local resistance to an ambitious Chinese tourist development plan for the island but had over the years also become a place to circulate local and international news that could impact everyday life on the island (Throop 2014; 2020). That day there were a few stories posted to the site about the new strain of coronavirus in Wuhan, with one group member captioning his post to a story from Yahoo News announcing the sixth person to die from the “mystery illness” in China: “Please ban travelers from China. If 1000 people die in China there will be very little impact on the country. If only ten die in Yap, it will be a very big loss.” The same contributor then added in the comments section: “Yap does not have a hospital capable of treating this, does not have doctors specializing in this type of disease, does not have the medicine for this disease, and certainly does not have enough people to die.”

That same day, my Google News feed was becoming populated with stories about the first cases being reported in Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. A day later, the first case had been confirmed in Washington State. As the news of the spreading infections and death circulated, and bits and pieces of the widely dispersed and dispersing worldly phenomenon now known as COVID-19 began to gradually fold into our daily news, conversations, and worries, what were at first vague intimations that something might be approaching on the horizon gradually coalesced into a more fully formed sense that *it is coming our way* (Zigon 2017; 2018). In fact, *it is already almost here*.

## LINGERING

*A bat sees a bug with a sound of linger*  
– The Tragically Hip (1994), *Yawning or Snarling*

As the Canadian singer-songwriter Gord Downie from the Tragically Hip poetically phrased it, a bat’s use of echolocation entails a responsiveness to a retentive lingering—a

sonic tracing—of the faint airborne reverberations of an insect’s unfolding movements.<sup>1</sup> Pitched toward an unfolding protential future but retaining something of an extended retentional past, lingering thus brings forth a trace of that which has already moved on while yet still underway (Husserl 1964; Throop 2003). It is, in some respects, the inverse of the phenomenon of looming, which entails the bringing forth of the future edge of that which is always already emerging but is not yet completely here. Distinctive from lingering, which retentively holds on to that which seeks to escape, looming discloses an as of yet to fully crystalized future that is in the process of piercing through present. Not an escape away from, but a coming toward. Where lingering discloses what echoes back from what moves along, looming reveals what is in the midst of just breaking through.

Inhabiting the indeterminate between, what looms is not yet, however, an object or event. And yet, it is still an object or event-like in its pending actualization. Pressing heavily against the always already receding veil that separates the unfolding present from the indeterminate horizon of the future, what looms is something whose arrival we must await, that we have no choice *but to* await. Looming and waiting are thus coupled in an intimate way, although it is worth emphasizing that waiting need not always be oriented to something that looms. As Vincent Crapanzano (1986) perceptively observes (and I will quote here from him at length),

Waiting means to be oriented in time in a special way. It is directed toward the future – not an expansive future, however, but a constricted one that closes in on the present. In waiting the present is always secondary to the future. It is held in expectation. It is filled with suspense. It is a sort of holding action—a *lingering* (In its extreme forms waiting can lead to paralysis.) In waiting, the present loses its focus in the now. The world in its immediacy slips away; it is derealized. It is without *élan*, vitality, creative force. It is numb, muted, dead. Its only meaning lies in the future—in the arrival or the non-arrival of the object of waiting. Waiting is always waiting for something. It is an anticipation of something to come—something that is not on hand but will, perhaps, be on hand in the future. It is marked by contingency—the perhaps—and all the anxiety that comes with the experience of contingency. It is a passive activity. We can never actively seek the object of waiting. We can, to be sure, do what we can to ensure its arrival if we desire it or to prevent its arrival if we do not desire it, but ultimately its arrival or non-arrival is beyond our control. (44; emphasis mine)

In dialogue with Crapanzano’s analysis, looming may thus be understood, like waiting, to be a passive activity of anticipating something soon to come; something *almost already here*. Where waiting can be understood as a form of lingering that “holds on to action” in order to leave room—on opening—for what is yet to emerge, looming gathers its intensity from

<sup>1</sup> According to the Encyclopedia Britannica Online (2021), echolocation is a “physiological process for locating distant or invisible objects (such as prey) by means of sound waves reflected back to the emitter (such as a bat) by the objects.”

that which is pressing forth in the process of its coming along toward us, beyond the reach of our expectations. To this extent then, looming is less contingent than waiting, less active than lingering. Looming is, as a result, arguably less open to the possibility that alternate possibilities will emerge. To be waiting for a future that looms is thus to have a sense of a foreboding arrival of the foreclosure of possibilities. A glimmer of certainty that something is coming. It is already on its way.

An experience in which something is looming is, I argue, a form of mooded attunement to the imminent arrival of a *not yet* that is in the process of emerging as an *arriving soon now* (Stewart 2011). While it may be entangled with moods like anxiety, dread, despair, and fear, looming is a distinctively mooded experience, however; one that is *pitched toward the event*. What looms harbors the *shape of what is to come*. The event at the incipient point of its becoming actualized is what catches hold of us in the experience of looming.

## MOVEMENT

As I had done for the past few years, I had purchased (as a Christmas present) front row seats for my father and my son to attend a Los Angeles Kings vs. Ottawa Senators NHL hockey matchup. The teams play each other only twice in any given season, splitting their home rink appearances between the two cities. It had become a family tradition to go see my hometown Senators play whenever they were in town (much to my son's dismay given his strong allegiance to the Kings).

This year's LA matchup happened to fall on March 11 (Figure 1). While the tickets were purchased back in what now seems like the dreamlike pre-COVID world of early fall 2020, on the day we were to use the tickets there were a total of 1,267 cases of COVID-19



Figure 1.

in the US with the death toll standing at thirty-eight. Given that my father is in his mid-70's and was waiting to undergo medical treatment in the coming months, we were uncertain as to whether we should attend the game. We discussed it at length in the days leading up to the match. A few hours before the puck was scheduled to drop at center ice, we decided to take the risk. While there was still so much that we did not know about the virus, at the time there were relatively few cases in the city (only twenty-seven recorded cases). We felt it was likely safe to go.

As we drove from the house to Staple Center downtown, however, the news broke that the NBA had decided to “suspend” its season as a player from the Utah Jazz had contracted the disease not long after the team had finished a Southern California run. We heard the news from Daniel, the father of Jonah's teammate, who called us *en route* to the game. Daniel and his son, Hudson, had purchased seats near us. We had plans to meet up at the rink. What was supposed to be a fun and exciting event for our boys was turning into a potential nightmare. We all discussed whether or not to continue with the plan and in fact sat for a few minutes in our respective cars in the parking lot, talking through our options. Going over the numbers again, we decided that it was *likely* safe to attend the game.

After parking we walked up from the parking garage to the Staples Center. Given the situation, I was not surprised to see that there were far fewer people than normal at the game. The line to get into the event was short and we found ourselves through security in a matter of minutes. The concourse was sparsely populated with Kings fans milling about and checking their phones. The atmosphere was far from celebratory. Daniel and I kept telling the boys to stop touching things and I became conscious of us both looking around to ensure that we kept as much of a distance as possible between our little group and others. At that point in the pandemic, only first responders had been advised to wear masks. The thought now of us all know walking through the (albeit sparse) crowd maskless gives me chills. Experiencing a rather different but still tangible discomfort at being amongst and exposed to so many strangers, at the time I recall thinking to myself, “we can almost feel it coming.”

Emerging from the concourse to the seating section of the arena, we walked as a group down to our seats immediately behind the Kings' bench. What is usually an amazing moment of proximity to the players, coaches, and managers—a thrill for anyone who is lucky enough to experience it firsthand—felt for the first time like we were too close for comfort. Luckily, there were so few people at the game that the seats around us were empty. The unfilled seats surrounding us pulled my attention to them, however, as they eerily radiated a presencing forth of absence of those who should have been seated ready to enjoy the view alongside us (Throop and Duranti 2015; Mack 2019; Throop 2010). While in an odd way somewhat comforting (as they gave us the sense that we were somehow safer apart from others), the empty seats near the glass, which even at poorly attended games were always filled with spectators, shined forth glimmers of a looming pandemic that was still in the midst of just emerging.

While Daniel, my father, and the boys got comfortable in their seats, I headed back up to the concourse to get us some food and drinks. Worried that I might miss some of the

action, I decided to stop at the closest stall, a small corner store-like stand just outside our section's entrance. After moving as quickly as possible to pick up some snacks, two apple juices, and a few beers, I walked straight up to the cashier (again a rather odd experience given that there was usually a fairly long line of customers waiting to be pay). While paying I asked the sullen-faced woman working the cash how she was doing and what she made of the NBA suspending their season. Looking up from the register, she said, "it's all so horrible, I have two children in college, I work three jobs, without the Lakers and Clippers games, I don't know how I am going to pay their tuition or my rent." Wishing to respond to her palpable distress, I asked if she had family nearby or anyone who could help. "No," she replied, as she looked back down at the register. "Thank God the NHL is still going," she said in a voice that carried the weight of her uncertainty along in its wake. "Yeah," I replied, somewhat meekly. The sonic contours our speech no doubt disclosing what the explicit content of our talk would not: the hockey season would be shut down too soon.

Back at the seats I dropped the food off and took the boys up to the bathroom to wash their hands. Remaining vigilant, I repeatedly told them to stop touching everything along way as *everything* radiated a potential new harm. As Husserl's (1989) phenomenological analyses have shown, "things" are intersubjectively constituted, non-totalizable, and temporally unfolding phenomena that variously reveal themselves to us in changing aspects. Significantly, this includes aspects that harbor announcements of what is just about to come into view. In this respect, what looms can also shine forth as an aspect of the various things that we may encounter in our world as well. And indeed, at that moment, every surface of the arena now disclosed a new potentiality of looming danger, of possible infection, sickness, and perhaps even death. While worried about the boys, myself, and Daniel, my father's age, frailty, and preexisting conditions brought into clear focus what was always already the case, even if not always noticeable: the permeable and contagious dimensions of our enveloping world that we necessarily share with and alongside others.

As we walked the concourse, glimpses of the looming pandemic where palpable, embodied, and sensorial. In that moment, while holding both boys' hands as we weaved our way through the sparse crowd toward the bathroom, any illusions of our being independent and self-sufficing beings was displaced by our vulnerable intercorporeal intertwining and worldly emplacement. Supervising their hand washing and again making sure they kept their hands to themselves as we walked back to our section (a difficult task for two seven-year-old hockey players excited to be with each other and there for the game), my thoughts extended out toward what the next few weeks would bring.

The Los Angeles Kings—who had been having a terrible season (at the bottom of the standings along with the Ottawa Senators)—were on a winning streak of late. The team looked sharp, and the game was exciting. Sitting immediately behind the bench, we could clearly see the players faces, their intensity, and athleticism. Jonah and Hudson were taking great joy in every Kings goal. It was a close game, tied at one point 2-2 in the third period.

And then the first puck hit. In a haze of barely visible movement, a puck flew over the boards to our right and hit a woman a few rows above us. There was a scramble of bodies as a few fans nearby checked in to see if she was okay, while others ran and tried to retrieve the puck as it rolled somewhere beneath the seats. The next thing I knew, the boys were



looking to the ground at their feet. A moment later Hudson had bent down and popped up with the puck in his hand. As I watched Hudson show the puck to Jonah, all I could think of was how dirty the floor must be; I would need to take them to go wash their hands yet again. Still smiling with the puck in hand, Hudson turned around to face a man who had walked down from the seats above us. Telling Hudson to hand him the puck so he could give it to the woman who had been hit by it, the man held out his hand a few inches from Hudson's face. Before any of us could react, Hudson complied and handed the puck over. A bit shocked but taking it in stride, the boys sat down and turned their attention back to the game. Daniel and I, less impressed with the situation, spent time discussing how inappropriate it was for two adults to take a puck away from two seven-year-old boys. The benevolent hockey gods must have overheard our complaint, however, as only a few minutes later a second puck flew over the glass this time hitting Daniel in the shoulder before dropping down to the same dirty floor. Daniel bent over quickly and picked it up, giving it immediately to his son (see Figure 2). An unlikely triumph! The boys were thrilled.



Figure 2.

They were even more thrilled when not long after, Martin Frk of the Kings scored what would turn out to be the game winning goal with less than five minutes left. As everyone stood cheering, I caught the eye of Todd McLellan the Kings' Head Coach, who had, up until that point, been emotionless most of the game, standing stoically over his players who were seated on the bench (see Figure 3). A glimmer of a smile emerged

before he reached up to cover his mouth as he coughed and turned away. And there it was yet again—an embodied glimpse of the looming pandemic shining forth in an instant. *It already was almost here.*

The next morning the NHL announced it would “pause” its season indefinitely until it was safe to resume again. We had attended what would become the last game of the 2019-2020 regular season.<sup>2</sup> Six days later the news broke that an unidentified Senators player had come down with COVID-19. We had been only feet away. *It had arrived.*



Figure 3.

<sup>2</sup> The NHL resumed a “bubbled” round-robin and that led to a playoff tournament in Toronto and Edmonton on Saturday August 1st, 2020. Given their low position in the standings, neither the Ottawa Senators nor the Los Angeles Kings participated.

## ATMOSPHERES

Held back for the first few years by a heart condition (self-diagnosis: “too much sport in my youth”), Heidegger had served as a meteorologist with the frontline weather service number 414 from August until November 1918. At Marne-Champagne, he provided forecasts to the German army from an observation post elevated a little above the battlefield to enable deployment of poison gas. Heidegger did not take part in actual fighting, but through his binoculars he would have seen many thousands of German soldiers emerging from their trenches and running toward certain death (Eilenberger 2020, 45)

Perched at his observation post watching the distant horizon for the formation of weather patterns shifting across the Western Front—as the poison gas deployed below him on the battled field swirled in configurations inflected by the temperature of the air and the velocity of the wind—the theologian cum philosopher cum wartime meteorologist—Martin Heidegger was well positioned to notice the phenomenon of looming in its various atmospheric and existential manifestations. Whether or not his later phenomenological analyses of attunement (*Befindlichkeit*) and mood (*Stimmung*) may have somehow been inspired by his observations of the enveloping dynamic atmospheric surround of the battlefield, such potential connections between looming and mood are quite alluring (Heidegger 1996). And yet, Heidegger was not, however, the first to phenomenologically discern the significance of such forms of affective responsiveness to worldly conditions of possibility.

Fourteen years before Heidegger took up his post on the Western Front, and nineteen years before he became his assistant, Edmund Husserl had already begun generatively analyzing the phenomena of mood and horizon as co-constitutive structures of experience (Quepons 2015). That experience is for Husserl, as Quepons describes, dynamically configured and oriented to a “world-horizon” that is disclosed in moods—a horizon that also implicates other horizontal shifts of foreground and background, of proximity and distance, of pasts, presents, and futures, and of that which approaches and moves away—already captures something of what I have traced the phenomenon of looming to be (Quepons 2015).

Later, in his lectures on passive synthesis, Husserl (2001) engaged in a much broader investigation into the affective contours of the shifting horizons that define our various modes of being with and amongst others and objects in the world. As Anthony Steinbock (2018) notes, Husserl showed in these lectures that “everything coming into relief as a unity of sense does so as an affective relief and as exercising an affective allure on the perceiver” (12). In other words, there is always already an “affective tonality” that is responsive to and shapes our experience of what has already become, what is presently here, and in the process of arriving (12). What is in the process of arriving may loom. Looming is thus disclosive of an aspect of becoming in a specific futural mode. How so?

In his helpful review of Husserl's famous distinction between protention and expectation, Steinbock (2018) points out that whereas protention involves

an anonymous sketching out of the future that is based on present occurrence and how that occurrence was retained as past. . . [a process that] takes place without any egoic activity or explicit attention to what is to come. . . Expectation is different from protention, however, insofar as expectation is an active comportment toward the future. (2)

In other words, whereas protention is a passively responsive feeding forward to what announces itself as approaching the present, expectation is a more active orientation to the existence of something futural that is “possibly going to happen.” Indeed, in “expectation, I count on the futural event as it is foreshadowed in the present” (3). Foreshadowing what is to come, expectations meet the future in its mode of arrival, openly welcoming that which is to come. And yet, what I would like to bear down on and examine a bit more closely is the enigma of both protention and expectation; the enigma that what is in the process of arriving is somehow anticipated by what has already arrived and perhaps has now passed us by. Protention as a passive constitutive stretching toward, and expectation as a more explicit foreshadowing of what is to come, are thus both openings toward that which is both not yet, and yet still quasi-here. The emphasis remains in both cases on the being who awaits the future to come. While necessarily entangled with looming, neither protention nor expectation are equitable with it.

Something more akin to, but still quite distinct from, the experience of looming is found, however, in Steinbock's (2018) insightful analysis of the phenomenon of surprise. When surprised, the smooth flowing of expectation is ruptured. In Steinbock's words, “it is as if what happens comes out of nowhere, precisely because it is otherwise than the expected flow or unfolding of what is to come” (5). Surprise entails thus, “the ‘shattering’ of the noema, the sense-content of my ongoing intentional acts . . . . What is demanded is a radical reconfiguration of sense, a new one supplanting the old (Husserl also writes of being ‘thrown from the saddle’)” (6). That something arrives that is not expected— “as if what happens comes out of nowhere” —reveals the instant wherein protention is caught reaching out to meet that which does not merely re-enliven its past retentive horizon of what Husserl (1964) termed the “running off phenomena.” This is an aspect of surprise that links it up with that which looms—both are pitched toward the event. In the case of surprise, we are faced with a sudden break with expectation, a coming into being of that which was not yet anticipated. In the case of looming, we are faced with a more gradual, uneven, and vague emergence of something still in the midst of arriving that breaks through and yet becomes entangled in the retentive array. What looms grows and folds into our future horizon like the clouds darkening and moving toward us on the horizon. In this respect looming can perhaps be understood as the inverse of the phenomenon of *decay*—what Ghassan Hage (2021) has described as a phenomenon that gradually reveals a not-yet in the form of a soon longer going to be (Flaherty and Throop 2018b; Harrison 2014).

## AIRBORNE

Unbidden, while driving to a hockey practice with a small group of friends now forced to follow strict COVID-19 related guidelines while on the ice, Jonah recalled the day he learned that COVID-19 was airborne. At the time (likely sometime mid-March), Jonah had been spending the afternoon at the small condo my father had rented that past fall across the street from the rink where Jonah's hockey team practices. A memory that had faded into the background oblivion for me, stood out as a striking flash of concern and worry for him. Apparently, I had called my father while the two of them were playing Jonah's favorite Playmobile hockey game. As Jonah remembered it, my father's mobile phone rang, and he listened as we spoke. I had called to let them know that I had read a news story confirming that COVID-19 was likely transmitted through droplets in the air and was thus "airborne." As Jonah sadly recalled, we talked for some time, and he overheard us discussing when and if my father should go back home.

Time was running out, it seemed, as rumors swirled that the borders between Canada and the US would be closing soon. My father, who usually stayed in Los Angeles until late April, was medically fragile and without adequate medical insurance to cover a lengthy hospital stay. We had to get him home. We worried about him traveling in a plane without a mask and talked about the possibility of my driving him cross-country to get him home. Our luck changed however when my wife, Karin, stumbled across two N-95 masks she had bought a few years ago for one of her art projects. One of the masks was still wrapped. The other had been used. The decision was made within a matter of minutes. Dad purchased his ticket home. His flight would leave in a week. It was time to pack up his condo and get him ready to go.

A few days later, on March 21st, a joint-statement was released on a US-Canada Joint Initiative to restrict travel across the border between the two countries to "all non-essential travel." Panicking, we called the airline to ensure that my father would be able to get home. After being reassured that he could enter the country as long as he had his Canadian Passport, we were informed that he would have to quarantine for fourteen days. I made the arrangements to find a place for him to stay as the snow had not melted enough for him to return to our family cottage where he has spent his late spring, summer, and fall months since retiring more than a decade ago. In the meantime, his original flight, and then a second, were canceled due to overbookings. Dad had to wait a bit longer before he could leave LA. The third flight was the charm. They had room for him on an evening flight on March 23rd.

All packed, my father stopped by our house to spend a few hours in our front yard with us before his departure. Having already spent ten days in our house without leaving or seeing anyone, Jonah was at first scared to even walk outside. In his first attempt, he walked a few steps out the door, saw his grandfather and ran back inside. After some coaxing, he emerged again, worried still that the virus was "everywhere." He and my father eventually began playing a social distanced game of ball hockey across the front lawn. When the time came for him to leave the painful hug-less goodbye left us all in tears. Jonah was

inconsolable in Karin's arms as my father waved goodbye from the back seat of our car; we had decided it was best I alone drove Dad to the airport.

To keep each other safe, I had rolled down all the windows in the car and the two of us had our N-95 masks on; his new, mine used. Each wearing blue surgical gloves we passed the eerily traffickless ride down the 101 freeway toward to the airport in silence. Entering a darkened LAX, almost completely empty of cars and people, only served to intensify the feeling of the already almost here of a looming pandemic. As we pulled up to the curb, I noticed that nobody at all was in line at Air Canada's check in counter (see Figure 4).

Parked, I walked out of the car and opened the trunk to retrieve my Dad's luggage. He waited six feet (about a hockey stick's length) from me on the sidewalk. It took all my will power not to hug him. He took his luggage and entered the building. I stayed outside and watched as he checked in and got his ticket from the kiosk. Once ready, he walked back up to the window to wave goodbye. We exchanged worried looks and brief smiles with tears in our eyes. He then turned and walked out of sight toward airport security. To say I felt sad at my father's departure is to miss the mark completely. Something darker, more foreboding had taken hold of me. Something certainly distinct from, but perhaps more akin to despair.

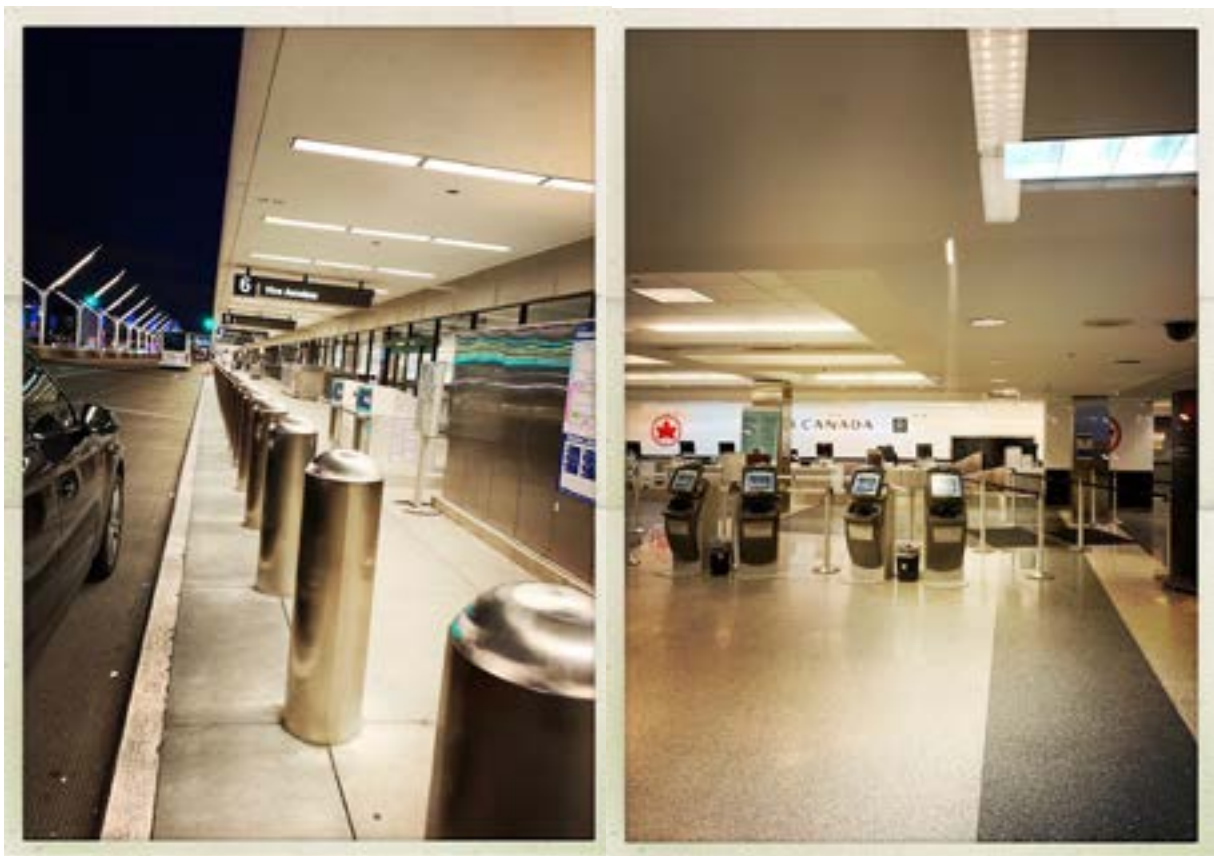


Figure 4.

## COLLAPSE

A clearer picture of the particular experiential contours of looming becomes evident when compared to other moods of possibility that may otherwise be also entangled with it (Throop 2014; 2017; 2018a; Throop and Stephan forthcoming). Take, for instance, despair. Despair is, as Steinbock (2014) suggests, a mood that is attuned to a radical loss of worldly possibility—a response to situations where the ground of hope becomes experienced as impossible. In contrast to “hopelessness,” which is occasioned in situations in which individuals are oriented to the impossibility of hoping for something specific and is thus geared into specifiable events, situations, or happenings, despair is attuned to the impossibility of hope itself. In despair, while I may still wish that things were different, and while I may regret that things had not gone otherwise, I cannot be openly attuned to the future in a modality of hope. Building upon Steinbock’s analysis, Matthew Ratcliffe (2015) observes that despair arises when there is a radical break with one’s ability to inhabit the “kinds of possibility the world incorporates” (110). When engulfed by despair, I am thus faced with the impossibility of possibility itself. In despair, events, situations, and the world appear as immovable, unchangeable, beyond my reach and control.

Like despair, what looms also appears as beyond our control. It is coming, we can feel its approach. In contrast to despair, however, where possibilities are already deemed impossibilities, what looms arises amid a still yet possible—a still yet possible that is attuned to the arrival of a radical reconfiguring or extinguishing of such self-same possibilities. It is the incipient breaking through of what is coming to be. As such, what looms is the pending, but not yet completely actualized collapse of possibilities, as new horizons are reconfigured in the wake of what is coming to be. As an attunement to what is to come, looming is thus receptive of a future that is in the process of becoming actualized in the present. Not yet, but soon to be. Not yet, but almost upon us. Not yet, but close.

In this respect, looming is also distinguishable from the mood of anxiety (*Angst*), which Heidegger (1993) famously characterized to be a founding mode of attunement (*die Befindlichkeit der Stimmung*) that reveals to us the nothing. Compared to fear, which inherently bears the intentional structure of being *fearful of* something in particular—snakes or spiders for instance—anxiety is not, as Heidegger puts it, anxiety of “in the face of this or that thing” (100). A mood of anxiety is instead attuned to an uncanny and indeterminate nothingness. As Heidegger recounts:

In anxiety, we say, “one feels ill at ease [*es ist einem unheimlich*].” What is “it” that makes “one” feel ill at ease? We cannot say what it is before which one feels ill at ease. . . . We can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings only this “no hold on things” comes over us and remains. (101)

What looms may also emerge from an indistinct and indeterminate horizon. In contrast to Heidegger’s description of the foundational mooded attunement of anxiety, however, looming is not disclosive of a nothing—what Heidegger characterizes as a “no hold on things.” What looms is instead precisely some thing, some event, some happening, even if

indeterminate and nascent in form, that is coming upon us, just about to arrive. Between the determinate structure of fear and the indeterminate nothingness of anxiety, looming is again pitched toward the event. It is the breaking through of the event into a present that awaits its arrival. Judith Butler (2022) is speaking to a resonate form of mooded attunement when she elaborates upon Scheler's analysis of tragedy and the intertwining of the sorrow of life and world in her contribution to this special issue:

The sorrow, in fact, moves between life and world, the event of loss, singular and irreversible, and the world that is now in its unpicturable entirety immersed in sorrow. In some ways, this is true insofar as the stories of loss overlap: the cell phone at the hospital; the getting barred at the hospital door; the inability to get to a hospital or to gain admission. They refer to this loss and that loss, each very specific losses, and yet as the mode of reference repeats across its occasions, a looming world of loss emerges, or perhaps its ambient atmosphere becomes, or threatens to become, the air itself, or the very way that the air is registered here and now. (16)

That *what is to come* has a shape and that the future may have a variety of forms that are experientially distinct, is thus an aspect of the future that looming foregrounds explicitly. That we are beings who can be attuned through moods to the immediate press of future events in the process of their coming to be, also suggests that as beings, we are all responsive and open to the world in its process of becoming – even when what is becoming is the end of our projected and hoped for future possibilities (Al-Saji 2020; Mattingly 2010; McCoy 2018; O'Byrne 2010; Seal-Feldman 2020; Throop 2018a; Zigon 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Announced just two days after my father left Los Angeles, Yap (along with the rest of the Federated States of Micronesia) closed its borders and all flights entering or leaving the island were canceled. Over ten months later, as I write the conclusion to this article, they still remain closed. To say that the COVID-19 pandemic once loomed at the dawn of 2020 or that 2023 and the end of the Compact of Free Association still looms for communities in Yap, is to recognize the mooded ways that the arrival of these two distinctive disasters, one still impending another still here, cloud the future's horizon. Such futures both anticipate the coming of funerals and the previously unthinkable end of our everyday modes of being with and among others in our variously shared worlds.

As a specific mooded orientation to our situated condition, looming reveals, as phenomenologists would say, that we are always already attuned to the world—even if that world in the process of beginning anew or fading away (Zigon 2014; Throop 2014; 2020). Given that in both cases—“the coming funeral” in Yap and the millions of funerals that arrived in the wake of COVID-19—it is clear that what looms has critical political



and ethical dimensions. How we prepare for such arrivals in the midst of their coming to be, how we work to mitigate and protect ourselves from such futures that are in the process of showing themselves, even if in uneven and indistinct ways as they move toward us with their own force and formation, is thus of critical significance for anything we might term a critical phenomenology. Given current worldly conditions—which now include the ongoing pandemic, global climate change, and emerging global political and economic unrest and realignment—the stakes for paying much closer attention to the ways individuals and communities are attuned to what is in the process of taking form—to what looms—could not, in my estimation, be more important.

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