The following is a sample of papers that came out of requests from group debriefing sessions with clinicians in Johannesburg during this Corona-Covid 19 lockdown. They attempt to think about the confluence of our relationship with the environment and the current pandemic with its social isolation and collective and complex crises or trauma that impact on patient and therapist alike.

This first paper is essentially about a developmental process but can be applied to larger macro processes that affect the collective psyche in terms of human ‘exposedness’ and universal dependence on an ‘average expectable environment’. Metaphorically speaking this applies to the gaze and behaviour of the natural and technological environment:


The author:

"In a negative way, human exposedness and universal dependence on an ‘average expectable environment’ (Hartmann, 1958) is demonstrated by technological or natural catastrophes, as well as accidents, on both the collective and the individual level. A tsunami rising up from the sea and thundering towards the people who try to flee from it on the beach, or a heavy lorry smashing through the safety barrier of a motorway and racing head-on towards one’s car, are examples of traumatic events of this type. They can be characterized as explosively irruptive monstrous quasi-objetcs.

Metaphorically speaking, in this case the environment no longer acts like a good enough mother, but turns into a bad mother, and even more than that, a monster that is not a bit considerate to her children, but rather, like Saturn, swallows them. Staying on this metaphorical track, man is no longer mirrored in the mother’s look as a human being. He or she is ‘disobjectalized’ as a mistreated, destroyed, and then dumped toy...
In this way, it appears that nature cannot be tamed, threatening to undermine one’s autonomy and pushing one regressively into states of infantile helplessness that may provoke uncanny feelings. As I’ve argued, in the felt ruthlessness of nature that is no longer the known and familiar ‘mother nature’, the certainty of being respected as a human being vis-à-vis the powerful and unseizable quasi-object dissolves (pp. 1189-1190)...

How might exposure to such a look feel? For me it is a performative look-as-act that catapults the other out of the state of being human. The other is no longer a human being... The look has annihilated the other’s human status in itself, destroying the victim’s fundamental, self-evident certainty of being a human being in the eyes of the person looking at her or him. This is perhaps an instance of the cold, indifferent primal ‘look’ of capitalism, which has usurped the place of the God who has been killed or driven out. Current issues of racism (Fakhry Davids 2011) and migration might also be reflected upon with regard to the annihilating look of the Other” (p. 1191).


The author, referencing Frawley-O’Dea, tackles the question of what happens when therapist and patient are confronted with the same crises at the same time and experience vulnerability and helplessness in the face of an indifferent reality? And how do we hold a space for ourselves and those of our patients? "The clinician’s commitment to being emotionally sensitive and responsive to both her own needs and those of her patients under conditions of extraordinary stress constitutes a nearly irresolvable conflict between the therapist's impulse toward self-protective retreat and her knowledge that the path of "speaking and listening from the site of trauma” (Caruth, 1995, p. 11) is the only way to help individuals and society come to terms with the personal and historical truth of a personal trauma, acts of evil, or social catastrophe" (p. 36).

The paper above is a critical commentary on:
Frawley-O’Dea, M. (2003). When the trauma is terrorism and the therapist is traumatised too: working as an analyst since 9/11. Psychoanalytic Perspectives, 1(1), 67–89.

In turn Peggy Reubens wrote a commentary on Goren:


A number of years later Frawley-O’Dea wrote this:


Why do earthlings not worry more about the damage their lifestyle causes to the environment asks Bruno Latour – quoted in this paper:


The author:

"We have stressed the fictions of catastrophe harbor hopes of renewal in the wake of devastation. One can appreciate how they function as a metaphor of rebellion, not of nature against culture, but of the individual against cultural requirements. Catastrophe could be perceived as an exterior event that would allow the hero to
extract himself from what Freud called "collective psychology," to emerge as an individual and thus to become reconciled with his desire" (p. 1405).

And more about the impact of natural disasters on the mental health of patients and therapists alike:


The author:

"In a particularly difficult feedback loop, the failure to get validation for one's experience exacerbates isolation, while the ability to validate others is compromised by that isolation. The sense of isolation was very powerful in the aftermath of the storm—professional, personal, and spiritual communities had been decimated—but the psychological isolation was most debilitating. Laub and Auerhahn (1989) described the loss of the internal empathic other often suffered by survivors of massive psychic trauma. The loss of that benign internal object compounded the growing sense of isolation that so many clinicians experienced after Katrina, leading them to have little hope of finding common cause with others.

In the psychoanalytic literature on witnessing, there is a growing emphasis on the significance of the outsider, "an other that stands beside the event and the self and who cares to listen; an other who is able to contain that which is heard" (Gerson, 2009, p. 1342). However, Oliver (2001) stressed the unfortunate consequences that can follow if a traumatic experience is left in the hands—or in the mind—of the witness. She argued that the witness should not be the "seeing subject, fixing the
other with her gaze, rather subject and the object must be reconciled” (p. 9). If the survivor does not, in effect, become a witness to her own experience, “the dynamic of hierarchies, privilege and domination” (p. 9) is repeated. The survivor remains dependent on the outside witnesses and does not fully lay claim to dissociated material.”


Reconstruction - Truth and collective memory post collective and complex trauma:


And something on hope:


The author:

“I shall quote, too, from Hanna Segal, herself a pioneer in drawing the kinds of analogies between psychoanalysis and literature that I am pursuing here...With Proust in mind, Segal wrote:
It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair—it is then that we must create our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, recreate life.

And in her last interview (2008), at the age of 90, she said:

The important thing [adopting the vivid symbol that she first found in Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic fable The Road] is to keep a little fire burning; however small, however hidden. I find this extraordinarily helpful: we live in a mad world, but for those of us who believe in some human values, it is terribly important that we just keep this little fire burning. It is about trusting your judgement, and the power of love. A little trust, and a little care.

I understand “the little fire burning” as a symbol of hope; an expression of that flame within that, despite all, can keep something alight and warm—that which is needed to sustain life through catastrophically dark days” (p. 1409).

And hope in a post-colonial context of racial trauma and poverty painfully reflected in our society amid this pandemic:


The author:

“Two psychoanalytic concepts provide critical cornerstones to the thinking of this project and inform the method and approach, namely radical doubt and radical hope.

I use Bion's notion of caesura (Bion, 1989), which he defines as an event, which simultaneously unites and separates as the mode of transformation; the caesura becomes a split when it is not tolerated (Civatarese, 2008). The caesura lies between the undifferentiated and the differentiated; the undifferentiated can be like a subterranean flow. Bergstein (2013) writes that Bion's notion of caesura is therefore a model for the gap, that raging river between two banks where catastrophic change can occur but where lies the danger of catastrophe as well. This, Bergstein (2013) states, is the almost impossible place Bion asks us to be - the emotional turbulence -
without gripping onto any of the banks to halt movement and to loosen the grip on familiar anchors until the next storm. Bion asks us to be in the eye of the storm (Bergstein, 2013). This request is reassuring as I often find myself in the storm. Bergstein (2013) states the psychoanalytic quest is not safe harbor but rather widening the capacity for motion and free flowing between the riverbanks; it is the mere movement and not its direction which matters.

Doubt, radical doubt, serves for the attainment for truth through emotional experiencing which provides a sense of belonging and focuses on processes and not the past, on relationships and not the content and on differences and movement, not direction or outcomes (Civatarese, 2008). It is a type of thought that overcomes the antithesis between the past and present providing a temporal third if you like. Bion says that emotional turbulence leads to reconciliation and psychic growth; the factor that allows the container to expand is not knowledge itself but emotion or rather shared emotion, at one-moment-the feeling of being in unison, being on the same wavelength and the communicability of feeling (Civatarese, 2008). Radical hope is the concept coined by Jonathan Lear (2007) that anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it and I would add a future yet to be articulated (p. 233)...

Kemarre Turner (1996) says: “You will always have sadness if you’re a true Aboriginal person” (p. 109); the weeping sadness of watching the sun go down and watching the sun come up is the Law (p. 104) and sorrow is unleashed in daily sorry business. The CAACAC/CASSE work demands being constantly challenged by contextual questions: How does one know? What does one know? How does one find a language for? How does one not reproduce or enact the post-colonial and racial relations and tensions in the very talk of violence, problems and solutions? How does one wait for articulation and representation and not lead and yet not be passive or idle? How does one maintain psychoanalytic thinking in the face of the concrete, the urgent, the powerless, the rupturing pain, the trapeze of life and death, the trauma of it all? Kemarre's words find a permanent place in my mind and stab me often: "I still have that grief, and tear, and rip in my heart like it happened yesterday. I still have that grief. Alakenhe...

Racial trauma straddles radical doubt and radical hope and is indeed the eye of the storm.

Kathleen Kemarre Wallace (2009) from Lytentye Apurte gives emphasis to two worlds needing to work together in her book Listening Deeply:

Both worlds are here now. Let's make it all work together.
To all the other children and people I would say: Come and listen to us, we will tell you our culture learn from us. That way we will all survive. We share this country. We need to work together and learn from each other. We must do things together; respecting, listening and thinking, doing things together not just talking all the time. Sometimes think, let there be silence. You must learn to wait. Let your thoughts come back to you. Understand how the other person maybe feeling too, appreciate you might not know the answer or understand the question. That's what it means to work in a cross cultural way. Respect has to flow both ways; learning too. (p. 171)

There is the rainsong and then alakenhe it rains: “Out of soil putrid with decay grow whole, grow whole!” (p. 243).