

# “The World Looks Like This From Here”: Kopano Ratele’s African Psychology

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This contribution engages the work of the contemporary South African Psychologist, Kopano Ratele, to illustrate the facets of sociopolitical and psychological dimensions of psychology from the Global South and its relevance for reimagining psychology across the continent and the global world. Ratele’s African psychology framework offers us both a contemporary and critical analytic lens to reflect on the psychic life of power from the vantage point of Africa. This article explores two thematic contributions of Ratele’s African psychology: (a) culture and tradition and (b) Black interiority. Ratele’s African psychology presents a marked departure from much African psychology scholarship in its attention to the psychopolitics of Black life and Black death. Furthermore, by presenting African psychology as orientation, Ratele can engage both ontological and methodological dimensions of Black subjectivity as diverse, complex, and nonessentialist. In putting forward Ratele’s scholarship as a key contribution to African and Black psychology, this article thus addresses the current epistemological impasse that seems to exist in psychology in Africa. This article concludes that Ratele’s African psychology may provide us with a means of addressing this impasse toward making psychology in Africa relevant.

### *Public Significance Statement*

This study suggests that psychosocial trauma and suffering and psychological well-being in Africa may be better understood and addressed through African-centered psychology. Challenges of psychology in Africa suggest that new methods and theories that center African worldviews are necessary to address the current impasse faced by the discipline. An African psychology also requires a more critical interrogation of culture and tradition. It must also address histories of colonialism and racism that are part of intergenerational traumas.

*Keywords:* African psychology, psychopolitics, Black interiority, culture and tradition, Kopano Ratele

### **African Psychology: Critical Insights and Challenges**

Not all African Psychology is necessarily Africa-centred. ... This differentiation between psychology that uses Africa as a site of data collection or application and psychology that regards Africa as a place of theory production is as vital as the idea of plurality within the body of work referred to as African Psychology. (Ratele, 2019, p. 14)

African Psychology—as discipline, orientation, and method—has become a significant challenging epistemology to traditional

psychology in Africa, particularly in its questions of disciplinary relevance. This centering of a question of relevance is however not new and comes on the heels of earlier calls for a more engaged and relevant psychology, both at the height of apartheid (see Nicholas & Cooper, 1990) and in postapartheid South Africa (see De la Rey & Ipser, 2004; Long, 2013; Macleod, 2004; Bame Nsamenang, 2006; Rock & Hamber, 1994). Spanning from the mid-1980s and more prominently in the early 1990s, what has come to be described as “the relevance debate” in psychology addresses itself to questions of accessibility and value of psychology in an African context. Arising from the discontent of psychologists in South Africa who had begun questioning the value of a discipline purportedly in service of a large populace that remained on the fringes of economic, political, and social freedom. Questions of access included the challenges of language, material resources to access psychological services, confrontation with worldviews about identity and

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personhood that alienated those seeking assistance, the political character of psychology itself in reinforcing racial apartheid ideology, and its continuing complicity in reinforcing classist and racializing practice within the discipline.

Scholars such as Seedat et al. (2004) have engaged this debate by focusing on failures of mainstream community psychology in addressing the intersections of inequality and its impact on psychological well-being at community level. Durrheim and Mokeki (1997) identify continuing challenges of racial disparity in knowledge production within the discipline including psychology's own complicit in furthering the agendas of racism in South Africa. De la Rey and Ipsier (2004) locate problematics of knowledge production in the discipline itself as part of the work of making the discipline more relevant. De la Rey and Ipsier further argue that questions of relevance may need to expand to consider relationship to psychology on the continent and global context. They also invite a consideration of relevance in terms of psychology's relationship with other disciplines. More recently, Long (2016) has engaged the relevance debate in terms of a market relevance that seems to be in contradiction and conflict with the social transformative imperatives of the discipline (Long & Foster, 2013). Subdisciplines that include critical psychology, critical community psychology, feminist psychology, and decolonial psychology attest to the vibrant critical scholarship that has characterized the discipline of psychology in South Africa (e.g., De la Rey & Ipsier, 2004; Duncan & Bowman, 2009; Duncan et al., 2001; Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Painter & Blanche, 2004). And yet, African psychology is distinctive in its call for a psychology that centers African experiences and ways of knowing. That is, a psychology that theorizes interiority from sites of African indigenous knowledge systems and practice. The next sections provide a biographical summary of Kopano Ratele as

scholar and activist, elucidate on African psychology, and introduce a key debate in the field via the approaches of Nwoye and Ratele.

### Who Is Kopano Ratele?

Born in 1969, Professor Kopano Ratele is a South African psychologist working in African psychology and men and masculinities studies. He is former codirector of the South African Medical Research Council, the University of South Africa's Violence, Injury, and Peace Research Unit. He has served as president of the Psychology Society of South Africa (during the period 2009–2010) and chaired the Board of Sonke Gender Justice. This is a nongovernmental organization that works across the continent of Africa to strengthen government, civil society, and citizen capacity in the promotion of gender equality; the prevention of domestic and sexual violence; and to reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS. Ratele is a public intellectual and has continued to publicly engage on varied social and political issues that include xenophobia, gender-based violence, matters on boys, men and masculinities, fatherhood, and critical psychology. He has engaged the principles of African psychology as part of practices of intervention to many of these social and political issues and has served as an advisory consultant on community and state programs of intervention. He runs the research unit on Men and Masculinities and the Transdisciplinary African Psychologies Programme. Professor Ratele is currently professor of psychology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. While the current article engages only two thematic aspects of his scholarship: culture/tradition nexus and Black interiority, it should be noted that questions of gender and sexuality constitute a significant and overlapping trajectory of this scholarship. Indeed, his oeuvre of scholarship and public engagement on Black masculinities remains one of Ratele's signature contributions to psychology, providing insight into Black men's interior lives and as political subjects (i.e., subjects produced in relations of power). His conceptualization of African psychology further orients this scholarship on gender and sexuality. Given the wide expanse of his work, this article only engages Ratele's scholarship on African Psychology.

### What Is African Psychology?

In his elucidation of African psychology, Mkhize (2004) addresses issues of language, philosophies, and worldviews as fundamental to a psychology in Africa. Mkhize's flagging of these three tiers for making psychology relevant draws attention to the context of cultural colonization that continues to characterize contemporary psychology on the continent. To truly attend to the needs of society, Mkhize argues that the discipline of psychology must engage with a people's worldview and own metaphysics. This is necessary for not only understanding who people are but also understanding their different orientations in the world. These orientations influence how we relate to others

and the environment and different temporalities. Similarly, Nwoye (2015) and also Nwoye (2017) challenges the Eurocentric roots of the discipline, particularly in its denigration of African cultures and worldviews. Part of his aim is to reclaim these marginalized histories and worldviews as a form of recentering. Other scholars engage different dimensions for centering African psychology that includes identity (Bandawe, 2005), worldviews and philosophies (Adelowo, 2015; Adjei, 2019), and African languages (Segalo & Cakata, 2017). Indeed, as a distinct psychology in its own right, African psychology has galvanized and returned full circle the debate on relevance in the discipline. Perhaps a key distinction between current debates on African psychology and the early debate on relevance is that contemporary scholars are no longer content to point out what is amiss in the discipline but also actively seek to re(imagine) solutions to questions of living from an African perspective. This scholarship shows the promise of reclamations of self and community via conceptual and theoretical tools that center African epistemologies and philosophies.

So, why distinguish Ratele's African psychology from these notable works? It is my contention that Ratele, perhaps more than any other scholar in this field, provides an in-depth career trajectory and oeuvre of scholarship and activism on the subject. Furthermore, his scholarship provides critical signposts for reflecting on Black interior lives outside of binary registers. Such binary registers often attend exclusively to notions of Black death that sideline registers of Black aliveness or alternatively engage overly romanticized registers of Africanity that fail to address the complex character of power for Black life. Quashie's (2021) work *Black Aliveness* similarly offers Black being sans exclusive anti-Black violence, instead exploring Black aliveness even amidst death. In this sense, then, Ratele's scholarship on African psychology takes us further into thinking about modernity and psychology in Africa in ways that do not simplify what it means to theorize from Africa nor make a caricature of the grim and often despairing status quo. Ratele engages African psychology as part of world-making, ever attentive to these nuances of Black life as complex.

Throughout the article, the term "psychopolitics" is utilized to refer to an orientation of how political factors may affect psychological formations or interior lives. It is also to recognize that the discipline of psychology, even in its most arbitrary and mundane forms, is always political in effect (Bulhan, 1985). This political character of psychology has to do with the relations of power that are part of its knowledge production practices. In this sense, then psychological knowledge production can be understood as ideological in form: given that it tends to emphasize some knowledge systems over others; sidelines some voices and often glosses over the complex and entwined relationship between social, political, and interior lives (Hook, 2004).

In considering exteriority, the article refers to those modes of embodiment that are external to the person, which include

the social roles that a person may embody such as being a father. Interiority refers to those cognitive and affective aspects of the person that we consider to be a private, internal world and not readily available to the public, such as our desires, ambitions, anguish and fears, shame, and so forth. Alexander's (2004) original use of the concept as internal intellectual space where Black people may exist absent from stereotypes, while useful, may seem to gloss over the intricate influence of social and political lives (to which the stereotype belongs) to the formation of such space. Quashie (2012) speaks of interiority in terms of an "inner life" (p. 6) that is neither apolitical nor lacking in social meaning, but nonetheless also outside of the social and political. By which we may understand him to be advocating an orientation to the inner life of the subject that certainly attends to how social and political factors may influence how the subject desires, fears, experiences vulnerability, and so forth, but also how these factors are not overdetermining of inner life. Ratele (2005) similarly engages questions of the psychopolitics of interiority in his explorations of Black intimacy as form of interior life that is structured by racial logics of apartheid South Africa. A key concept that encapsulates sites for thinking, knowing, and doing is the notion of register. The concept is used to refer to a conceptual frame or vocabulary related to a school of thought. Thus, for example, Sithole (2020) engages the Black register as a site from which to explore Black humanity. While Ratele frames his African psychology as orientation, we may similarly consider such orientation as a register to not only frame knowledge about psychology but also about the African subject (Appendix A).

### African Psychology as Orientation

Drawing an important conceptual distinction between African psychology and Africa(n)-centered psychology, Ratele (2014) and Ratele (2017a) draws attention to some of the misleading meanings that African psychology as a burgeoning field of study has occasioned. His distinction alludes to the importance of orientation: what do we orient ourselves when we say we practice African psychology? This question of orientation implies that it is possible to work with data derived from African contexts and/or to write about African contexts and yet not produce knowledge that is relevant to the very people that are researched and written about. It is also to imply that African psychologists may write about their contexts and the myriad social issues relevant to their context but work within alienating and objectifying paradigms that reproduce their subjects in problematic ways. Given this then, the question of orientation is an important one and one that is necessary to elucidate exactly what an African psychology is. Deviating from Nwoye (2015), Ratele further conceptualizes African psychology in less overarching ways, preferring an approach that considers multiple orientations—to psychology and Africa—not bound within disciplinary frames:

**Table 1**  
*Four Orientations of African Psychology (Ratele, 2017b)*

Orientation	Guiding epistemological enquiry
Psychology in Africa	Universal approach that posits psychology as universal and scientifically objective. Tends to be apolitical in orientation.
Cultural African psychology	Centering of African culture and spirituality. Indigenization of psychology considered important.
Critical African psychology	Centering of critical interrogation of power/knowledge nexus within the discipline as a whole in relation to Africa.
Psychological African studies	Psychoanalytically inclined African studies.

African psychology as a set of orientations and not as itself a sub-discipline, or an applied branch of globalized—we will not be wrong to say world-colonising—Western-centric psychology like neuropsychology, health psychology, or human development. (Ratele, 2019, p. 14)

The issue of African psychology as singular versus diverse that both Nwoye and Ratele address in their respective engagements with each other's work illustrates the contested terrain of the field that includes different strands of work highlighting dimensions of approaches and perspectives (Ratele 2017c). What is certainly evident is the increasing call for a practice of psychology in Africa that honors the history, worldviews, and language of its people (Ratele, 2018). These dimensions are not seen to be mere tools to access research sites but rather as a broader psychopolitical project of reclaiming dignity and a sense of theorizing from one's center and location (Table 1). Ratele (2017b) provides a useful thematic summary of this strand of work, categorizing African psychology scholarship into four broad thematic areas. These four thematic areas are summarized in Figure 1.

Ratele's (2019) academic, research, and social activist career has publicly engaged African psychology as theory and method,<sup>1</sup> but it is his recent book publication, titled,

*The World Looks Like This From Here: Thoughts on African Psychology* that provides a critical elucidation of an African psychology. I engage this and his other texts on African psychology to demonstrate not only Ratele's original theorizing on African and Black interiority but also his contribution to a "psychopolitics" (Fanon, 1967) of psychology. In the next section, I introduce Ratele's theorizing on African psychology. I argue that Ratele offers a particularly unique entry into African psychology in the way that he traverses different yet intersecting thematic registers (see Figure 1, for summary). Underpinning these registers is Ratele's own conceptualization of African psychology as *orientation* and *method* that offers us a way out of the impasse of a psychology in Africa that continues to struggle with notions of relevance.

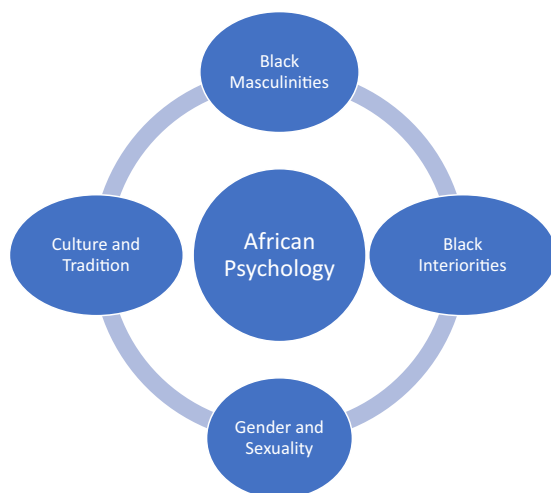
### *Ratele's African Psychology: A Psychopolitics of Living and Dying*

The problem to which ... a situated psychology responds, then, is the problem of *living well* psychologically, culturally, and not just physically, *but also of dying well*. (Ratele, 2019, p. 5, emphasis added)

Ratele's African psychology returns us to a core psychoexistential problematic posed by Fanon—that of reading interior lives of subjects living in aftermaths of traumatic racializing histories. Ratele further seeks to engage a psychology in Africa that attends to continued social and material asymmetries and how these may influence psychological existence. Both their psychopolitical projects further challenge modes of analyses that essentialize social categories and identities, and that theorize these identities as natural and apolitical. In this sense, then, there are several shared themes in both Fanon's and Ratele's psychopolitics that includes a politics of well-being within a racially oppressive, classed, and gendered society. Ratele perhaps engages a more politically minded and critically insightful analysis of gender and sexuality than Fanon. Indeed, feminist critique of Fanon's gender and sexuality politics is well documented (see Lebeau, 1998).

In *The World Looks Like This From Here*, Ratele (2019) traverses a disciplinary terrain that effectively achieves five objectives: (a) a reflection on the discipline of psychology;

**Figure 1**  
*Five Core Thematic Registers in Ratele's African Psychology*



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for Ratele's Google Scholar profile.

(b) a reflection on the teaching and research pedagogies of the discipline; (c) a reflection on the world at large that we live in; (d) a reflection on the worlds that live within us; and (e) a reflection of an African psychology orientation that can offer an alternative to the present epistemological, methodological, and ontological entanglements that currently diminish the capacity for a relevant psychology in Africa. These five objectives inform Ratele's scholarship across gender and sexuality, masculinity studies, and personhood. Connecting these five terrains, Ratele seeks to address psychoexistential questions arising from Africa's histories of and continued social and political struggles and trauma. He proposes a situated psychology that fully wrestles with its historical and contemporary context—a context embodying material, political, social, and cultural entanglements of social inequality. And yet, if Ratele's African psychology tells us something about the immeasurable states of injury and constant vigilance over death and dying that are part of many Africans' psychoexistential and material lives, it also tells us something about living and loving. After all, stories of collective trauma and failures of state to provide care and protection for its people exist alongside stories of joyful living and loving.

How best to capture these nuances of what it means to be human? Of existing in a world characterized by dire inequalities and oppression but also consciously choosing to love and form attachments that nurture? How to speak about care of self, of communities, and each other in ways that explore the intricacies of psychological and social freedom? How do Africans see the world? How do we relate with each other as part of our world imagining and the geographies that we traverse? What temporalities are important to us as part of this (re)imagining? To address these questions, Ratele's starting problematic is to ask three interlacing questions: What does it mean to be African? Why speak of an African psychology at all? What questions of exteriority and interiority are of relevance to a people born in and residing within Africa? Ratele's African psychology is a psychology rooted in the dynamic character of society as a *living* entity (Ratele, 2003); a society that cannot be abstracted from its traumatizing history; that nonetheless makes a space/place for the emergence of living persons that re/imagine their relationships to the past and the future; a people that have always had a diverse map at their disposal to generate and contest meanings about what their humanity and lived realities might represent:

African-centred psychology would fully embed itself in the realities of Africa, its histories and traditions, economies and cultures, politics, religions, multiple temporalities and modernities, even though it must always be looking at and responding to the world at large. (Ratele, 2019, p. 200)

### ***Ratele's African Psychology as Historical–Aesthetic Methodology***

From the three centering problematics, Ratele further presents us with connecting psychosocial entanglements that span a range of work that includes psychosocial experiences of

fathering/hood, gender and violence, toxic and positive masculinities, centering of African ontologies in understanding the differential ways people live their lives as social subjects. His oeuvre of research and social activism entails critical and plural methodologies of entanglement and disentanglement that are important for understanding impediments to psychological and social freedom that is at the heart of his theorizing about interior and exterior lives. His challenge to western and Euro psychology as received and practiced in Africa is for us to consider seriously what needs to be discarded altogether. To consider the conceptual and methodological *unlearning* that must occur for authentic and relevant practice to become possible. What linguistic, symbolic, and conceptual repertoires would psychology as a discipline have to give up if authentic understanding and healing of African lives can be possible? This is the fundamental question. Put differently, how may we access the interior life of a person when we fail to address them in their ideal language of understanding? Or when we fail to consider the symbolic and other resources that they consider to be important to their existence in the world? For Ratele, the question of language is an important one given that English remains a minority language for majority Black people in Africa. The view of the personhood as predominantly individual-oriented is also another fallacy that Ratele challenges, favoring the African worldview of the communal subject that derives a sense of self in relation to significant symbolic and social resources.

Thinking anew the registers of alienation and disorientation—and the intricate ways that these registers are part of social systems of unemployment, structural violence, racism, and patriarchal logics—Ratele's African psychology is in a sense something resembling what Flatley (2009) has defined as a historical–aesthetic methodology. Ratele's psychopolitics questions the social structures, disciplinary discourses, institutions, and processes that have been influential in emptying us of feeling, love of self and others just like us, reinforcing of cultures of violence that include homicide among majority Black men in South Africa. To what can we turn to make sense of alienation and disorientation? What ordering systems of logic, what logics of self and feeling? Given that historical processes of governance and oppression are complicit in this situation, then surely it makes sense to ask, in a paraphrase of Flatley (2009, p. 3) “how long has our alienation been in preparation?” How long have we been building to these myriad social crises of self, community, and belonging that are themselves not always new but different in form and influence? It is easy to say that colonial, postcolonial, and apartheid legacies have brought us here and leave it at that. While this would be true, we must also be wary of not attending to the “smaller” events of history, the everyday moments of interaction and agency with which we make sense of our histories, presents, and futures. For example, the Apartheid Archives Project (Duncan et al., 2014; Stevens et al., 2013) collects the narrative accounts of racism by ordinary South Africans living under apartheid.

The project attends to the more quotidian experiences of racism, mostly not accounted for in national archival memorializations, as a means of recognizing that events of racism and racialization are not only found in the spectral public moments but also in the everyday and sometimes in banal ways. This became evident in many of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee accounts that were offered by many victims of apartheid. It is also evident in how racial profiling of Black men by the police in the context of the United States is not only important in the spectral moment of a murder of a Black man but also in how everyday physical movement of many Black men can induce self-policing and surveillance. And so, if alienation and disorientation serve as key sites to think through the psychopolitics of power, what can the psychopolitics of freedom look like?

### Africa's Temporality: Theorizing Culture and Tradition

Ratele's strand of scholarship on culture and tradition may be framed as an examination of Africa's temporality. By this, I refer to the predicament of reading psychical and social experiences of time in tandem with the material, political and social configurations that sustain them. The invocation of culture and tradition as part of essentialist claims of African personhood attests to this character of temporality in dominant conceptualizations of Africa/n. For example, "purist" constructs of (African) culture or what it means to be African tend to invoke an impermeable state-of-being that is romanticized as pure, untainted, and timeless. Such constructs are in turn deployed in the discriminatory and oppressive practices against many women, girls, and nonheteronormative persons. For example, speaking to church congregants on July 5, 2015, in Kenya, Deputy President William Ruto not only denounced sexual and gender minorities but also justified his attacks by stating that nonheteronormative relationships were unnatural and un-African (Reuters, 2015). This example highlights the self-serving ways that constructs of culture and tradition can be deployed to withhold rights from some citizens—in some instances, even rendering some persons as noncitizens, such as those in same-sex relationships. Such purist understandings of culture tend to represent practices and beliefs as immutable, timeless, and ahistorical. Colonial influences on current anti-sodomy laws thus remain absent in these reflections on sexuality. Arguably, the reification of culture and romanticization of precolonial periods have also been evident in some indigenous psychologies. And yet, as Allwood and Berry (2006) also point out, western and Eurocentric psychology is also indigenous psychology and just as guilty of this reification of culture. In this regard, I agree with Hwang (2011) that critique of the reification of culture across psychologies has not fared the same. Nonetheless, Allwood and Berry's (2006) caution is an important one that flags the dangers of essentialism in the analysis of culture.

In his own reading of culture and tradition, Ratele aligns with much African feminist theorizing that encourages critical examinations of how culture as discursive rhetoric is often

deployed and even understood. For example, Tamale's (2011) edited volume *African Sexualities* brings together an array of African scholars and activists across the continent reflecting on gendered and sexual dimensions of invocations of culture. More recently, African feminist and decolonial scholarship have tackled head-on critical understandings of culture that engage its dynamic character. For example, Malherbe (2020) engages the radical liberating capacity of culture as part of liberatory process. He proposes three pathways to reimagining culture that challenge the essentialized and immutable features of culture in psychology. The Ugandan feminist scholar and activist, Stella Nyanzi, also critiques this reification of culture in gender and sexuality bias rhetoric (Nyanzi, 2013). Tamale (2008) critically reflects on the conundrum of women's rights in Africa placed in opposition to culture rights. Similarly, Kessi and Boonzaier's (2018) decolonial feminist psychology project seeks to challenge traditional constructs of culture in feminism and psychology. Bulhan (1985) similarly challenges nostalgic leanings of liberation that re/produce constructs of culture that favor universalizing definitions. In their special issue on decolonization and psychology, Adams et al. (2015) similarly present a biting critique of such universalist approaches to knowledge in psychology. Ratele's own strand of work (Malherbe & Ratele, 2022; Ratele, Malherbe, et al., 2021) tackles head on the problem of rigid conceptualizations of culture that primarily serve to prop patriarchal and other opportunistic deployments of the concept.

### Restrictive and Centering Function of Culture

Why does a critical analysis of culture and tradition feature so strongly in Ratele's African psychology? An immediate answer could be that culture and tradition are critical components of human subjectivity and therefore important to understand any person's sense of self. But this is only partly true. Indeed, as Ratele himself observes: "society does not end with one's own culture, however hegemonic, and ... any one individual's consciousness is exactly one *minor* part of culture" (2007, p. 75, my emphasis). To begin to answer this question of why critical analysis of culture takes such prominence in his theorizing, consider how the discourse of culture surfaces in many representations of gender-based violence in South Africa, for example, in a 2020 expose on gender-based violence in the country, the local news broadcaster, South African Broadcasting Corporation, focuses on culture as a key influencing factor in violence against women and girls (South African Broadcasting Corporation News, 2020). In these reports, culture comes to take on a galvanizing role in violence and perceptions of violence. This is one way that culture is constructed as an essence that has the potential to not only cause but also justify violence. The other way that culture as a distinct and galvanizing "entity" may be deployed is in the service of engendering intergroup hostilities and hate. For example, when African culture is constructed in purist ways that construct

nonheteronormative sexualities as un-African. But of course, culture as essence may also be deployed in ways that seek to “recover” presumed identity losses and to foster bond within social groups—in ways that may promote healing for individuals and communities but may also foster hostility and conflict against an identified “outsider.” In tandem with this menacing view of culture, there is increasing awareness of the potential for shared culture practices to be a source of connection and belonging for many. Indeed, part of the thrust of much African psychology scholarship is the idea of culture as a source for healing and recovery.

Is it possible that we can attribute to culture such influencing and distinct qualities that enable violence but also healing? Is it possible that we may speak of culture as though it were a neutral and objective “thing,” preexisting and existing separately from formations of social groups, and imbued with such power to cause violence, unhappiness *and yet* also happiness and healing? Ratele’s caution to consider both the healing and dubious uses to which the constructs of culture may be brought flags the role of culture as ideology. Arguing that “there is a threat lurking in many definitions and uses of culture” (2007, p. 67), Ratele is at pains to recuperate the place of culture in an African psychology orientation that is also simultaneously cognizant of the double-edged sword that culture may play in hindering psychological and social freedom. And so, his task is twofold: attention to both the *centering* function of culture but also the *restrictive* uses of culture. Interrogating culture’s conflation with tradition, notions of the modern with traditional and the past with the present and future, Ratele’s oeuvre of work highlights this ambiguous temporal character in how culture is both used and abused.

Two key readings of culture and tradition addressing this character of temporality may be evidenced in Ratele’s work. Less concerned about the authenticity of how we define culture and more concerned about the uses to which these definitions may be brought, he engages critical distinctions between culture, custom, and tradition to arrive at a view of culture that is permeable and dynamic. His distinction posits culture as “permanently incomplete system of lessons and acts we get to learn over time and use to navigate our worlds” (Ratele, 2007, p. 65) while recognizing rites of passage and practices as part of what we may describe as custom and tradition. This distinction matters in flagging how culture as a point of reference may be used to rigidly draw boundaries between people and serve oppressive agendas:

Another danger of this concept arises because “lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, heritage and beliefs” are often seen as rigidly married to a timeless tradition. Consequently, culture is accepted as a state of group life that is antagonistic to transformation. (Ratele, 2007, p. 71)

Given culture’s encoding in symbolic, material, and habitual practices that are themselves not static, culture is not only inevitably incomplete but also open to contestation. What

liberating insights on culture can be derived from an African psychology orientation? Put differently, how can a critical African-oriented analysis of culture be more freeing? This is part of the challenge Ratele poses to us, and in so doing, deviates somewhat from much African psychology scholarship that inadvertently tends to re/produce static and romanticized notions of culture that fail to accommodate for multiple belongings. Such failure means that group boundaries become solidified in ways that do not accommodate for differentiation, both within and outside the boundaries of the group. Makhubela (2016) has discussed some of these epistemological weaknesses in African psychology scholarship.

Furthermore, in distinguishing between what he describes as receptive versus reductive conceptualizations of culture, Ratele alerts us to the polarizing and ideological uses that culture discourses may embody. This is in contrast to the more embracing and liberating ways:

When men and women of particular cultures find it important to conceive their world in reductionist, fundamentalist terms, they can become dangerous. ... The danger is tied to the severe politisation of culture and the rigidification of the cultural grid. (Ratele, 2007, pp. 67, 74)

Interrogating culture in this way means that we are tasked with not only a question of subjective temporality but also social and political temporality. By this, I mean that questions of what it means to be or belong to a social and cultural group, with a given history and sets of customs and values, do not only influence how we view and relate to ourselves and others. These questions are also part of our relation to social memory and imaginations of the present and future. This is also a significant underpinning to postcolonial temporality that Fanon (1967) and Mbembe (2013) underscore. Mbembe builds on Fanon’s (1967) idea of racial trauma and its undermining of the capacity to *imagine* into the future. In a sense, consequences of racial trauma mean that an “inability to project themselves forward in time” (Mbembe, 2013) haunts the victim of racial oppression. The trappings of reductionist orientations to culture and tradition exemplify similar incapacity to imagine a more dynamic view of culture that is porous and less threatened by diversity. In effect, it is such reductionism that underlies much misogynist and toxic heteronormative constructs of “Africanness,” gender, and sexuality. Injunctions to hold onto cultural practices become solidified in psychic and social investments that may become dangerous and hostile to those who are perceived to threaten the sanctity of culture. And it is precisely a tradition of interrogating our use of culture and tradition that psychological and social freedom can be imagined anew:

An ever-enlarging, critical, gender conscious understanding of culture best enables African women and men to further re-imagine themselves as members of different groups, several places and citizens of the world, all at the same time. (Ratele, 2007, p. 66)

The arrest of future imaginations is not the only facet of temporality that arises in Ratele's analyses of culture and tradition. The rigid boundaries carved around culture and tradition imply that our imaginations of the past and present also become bound to a limiting view of change and influence. For example, ideas and constructs of "the African way" may come to be imbued with romanticized and nostalgic features that fail to account for how members of a group may be different, how some customs and traditions may be detrimental to the well-being of some members or all of its members, and even how these practices may hinder the developmental progress of a society. Rigid ideas about modern versus traditional ways of doing things and thinking about ourselves and our relationships to others are some of the ways that culture discourses limit possibilities for contestation, fluidity, and change. These arrests of temporality in constructs of culture and tradition fail us even more when they present a view of culture that disavows just how much cultures and traditions *have changed over time*. As Ratele (2007, p. 68) astutely observes: "cultures that fail to acknowledge their own imperfections and limits are harmful to their members and jeopardise their proclaimed benefits." His strand of studies on culture and tradition is interwoven with a second strand of thinking that I would frame as the question of Black interiorities. To fully appreciate the liberatory possibilities of this second strand of Ratele's scholarship, a more explicit connection between his and Fanon's psychopolitical projects is necessary (Figure 2).

### Ratele and Fanon's Psychopolitical Projects: Envisioning a Psychology of Relevance

This is a harrowing account of the death, torture and disappearance of utterly vulnerable mental health care users in the care of an admittedly delinquent provincial government. It is also a story of the searing and public anguish of the families of the affected mental health care users and of the collective shock and pain of many other caring people in our land and elsewhere in the world. These inhuman narratives were rehearsed before me, the Arbitrator, in arbitral proceedings I am about to. (Moseneke, 2018, p. 2)

Between March 2015 and December 2015, 144 patients in mental health facilities in the Gauteng province of South Africa would die from neglect, torture, and starvation. A further 1,418 patients were subjected to torture and other inhumane treatments. These and other horrors would be revealed in the public hearing testimonies following investigations into the deaths. Presiding Justice Dikgang Moseneke's biting indictment of the South African provincial government and the Gauteng Department of Health in his arbitration over what came to be known as the Life Esidimeni Tragedy remains a poignant moment in the country's democracy. The Life Esidimeni Tragedy would grip the country in its testaments of gross human rights violations, perpetrated by state and professional health bodies, and against vulnerable patients in their care.

Elsewhere, Draconian Bills dating back to colonial era remain firmly entrenched in more than half the countries on the continent, with several countries recently tightening the law to reflect even harsher sentences for many sexual and

**Figure 2**  
*Thematic Summary of Five Key Registers of Ratele's African Psychology and Corresponding Framing Questions*

Thematic Register	Framing Questions
African psychology	To what do we orient ourselves when we study African psychology? How do we orient ourselves to psychology and to Africa?
Culture and Tradition	What can historically minded readings of culture and tradition offer us? What can critical African gender analysis of culture offer us by way of questioning the function and meaning of cultural practice?
Black interiority	"What are the routes to, and pasts, possibilities, and forms of, the interior world of the African or Black person in its relations to the politics and economy of superiority and separation?"
Gender and Sexuality	How are culture and psyches 'unconsciously' interwoven with each other? How do cultures shape unconscious libidinal desires that implicate how we see gender and sexuality with avowed tradition, race and culture?
Black masculinities	How to think of men as a social group who—intentionally or not—receive structural support in their dominance over women? How to think of men in their personal situations and they might also be oppressed in different social and financial economies?



gender minorities. According to Amnesty International, the death penalty remains in four countries for sexual and gender minorities, and same-sex relationships constituted as illegal in 32 countries (Amnesty International, 2018). Law and public opinion denouncing same-sex relationships in these countries very often rely on popular notions and constructs of nonheteronormative relations as “un-African” and an “imported lifestyle from the West.”

In 2015, at the height of the COVID pandemic and ensuing lockdown across the continent and globally. Alongside a climate of uncertainty and anxiety, an emerging global politics that influences vaccine access across the continent attests to a necropolitics that largely posits Black African bodies as less deserving of right to life. As if the COVID pandemic is not enough, the lockdown would highlight another ongoing “pandemic” of even more vulnerable populace—intimate partner violence against women, children, and lesbian gay bisexual transgender intersex people.

What do these disparate cases have in common, and what can they mean for a psychopolitics of psychology? The ill-treatment and torture of vulnerable patients in mental health facilities, the denial of citizenship rights because of sexual orientation, and the denial of vaccines are horrifying not only for what they reveal about the disregard for human lives, but also in flagging what happens when persons become unrecognizable as human. Put differently, human bodies become so insignificant that they become disposable. This is at the heart of what the postcolonial scholar Mbembe (2019) describes as a form of necropolitics. This is a term that he uses to reflect on the nexus between state sovereignty and formations of race in the modern world. That is, how the modern state engages new forms of power that have to do with how and what bodies may die. Necropolitics then is an important contrast to Foucault’s biopolitics that centers sites and politics of living. In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe (2019) centers the body that dies, suffers, incarcerated, tortured, and so forth, as part of this exercise of sovereignty. He is also at pains to theorize the subject matter of the “living dead”—those that are not dead but whose existence is characterized by erosion of life-affirming features (p. 92). The systemic racism of colonialism and apartheid and the continued racialized, classed, and even gendered systems of oppression that are part of contemporary African and global states mean that for many, living remains impossible. For many, dire poverty and vulnerability to violence in its myriad forms exemplify this idea that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembé & Meintjes, 2003, p. 11). Sandset (2021), Lee, (2020), and Canham (2021a, 2021b) explore this necropolitics in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Lee (2020, p. 1) “COVID-19 isn’t simply a medical or epidemiological crisis; it is a crisis of sovereignty,” while Canham (2021a, p. 1) observes the

“disproportionate dying in our families, communities and the dying in the Black diaspora.” This disproportionate dying (and suffering) characterizes the never-ending states of mourning within Black communities. For Canham (2021a), such ceaseless state of grieving and mourning that attaches to Black life means that even during moments of supposedly distinctive social malaise such as the COVID pandemic, Black death remains familiar. Taking this further, Canham (2021b) further suggests that an inevitable politics of death that emerges from this familiarity of Black death is a thanatopolitics that results in state policing and surveillance of death and mourning rituals. This became painfully evident in South Africa at the height of the pandemic lockdown, which saw the state dictate not only burial and mourning rites—for example, gatherings of not more than 50 were officially allowed, and in some instances, travel to bury a loved one prohibited, but also the grieving process was fraught with improper closure as the bodies of the deceased, sealed in airtight bags and coffins, and buried by soldiers and morgue employees, could not be seen by their family. Once again, we see the exercise of sovereignty expressed in the form of a thanatopolitics—that is, the taking control of death and dying by state. In a different vein, Butler’s (2004) *Precarious Lives* explores the vulnerability of bodies coded as nonhuman to violence and loss. The ubiquity of precarity similarly centers JanMohamed’s (2005) notion of the *Death-Bound* subject—that is, the subject vulnerable to death and Avilez’s (2020) *Injury-Bound* subject extends this notion of vulnerability further to engage Black and queer bodies. A relevant psychology must grapple with the intersecting vulnerabilities evident in Black death and suffering. The contexts of where people live and the myriad influencing forces of state politics, economics, cultural, social, and psychic life must be at the heart of a psychology that is in service to its populace. Ratele’s concerns about interiority and the social and political contexts that shape interior lives engage these issues of precarity and living and dying as vulnerable and alienated subjects. His overall project is to consider “a psychology that places African centre-stage in working out the meaning of their lives” (Ratele, 2019, p. 209), challenging dominant individualized notions of personhood that marginalize the significance of relatedness for many Africans. For Ratele, African worldviews and practices that help us address alienation and fragmentation within many Black communities are a necessary first step to healing. It is also to entrench a politics of Black love in every facet of living and dying such that a necropolitics and thanatopolitics that is infused in how different governing bodies lay waste to Black life is eradicated. It is also to entrench an orientation to personhood within the discipline that centers our location in Africa and thus more readily becomes relevant in practice.

And yet, if a politics of death and dying is central to understanding Black (African) and perhaps Queer interiority, I would argue that a politics of life and living is just as central:

how we live, the relationships we form and our attachments, cultural and social norms, and values that steer us, how we understand ourselves and our place within our families, communities, and broader society. If it is important to understand the necropolitics or thanatopolitics that is at the heart of the politics of the human, so also does an attention to *live-ability* or how people make lives. After all, the everyday navigation of life via fraught relations of injury and death exists simultaneously alongside the will to live and the business of making lives. In the midst of survival, attachments are formed; intimate and loving relationships abound; the experience of joy, desire, and pleasure; and the active reimaginings of how we raise children. These practices of joyful living and painful loss reflect the depths and complexities of being human. In making the case for a psychopolitics of psychology, I am concerned with these dynamic states and politics of life and death across a continent that is itself diverse and fluid in its politics, histories, and practices of governmentality.

Fanon's (1967) conceptualization of psychopolitics as fundamental to the discipline and practice of psychology informs my usage of the concept. By psychopolitics, he refers to the ways that the realm of the political (i.e., relations of power) may influence the realm of the psychological, both in terms of our interior lives and also in terms of the discipline of psychology. The history of psychology in Africa and South Africa more specifically demonstrates that a psychopolitics has always been intrinsic to the discipline. One need only consider South African psychology's murky roots in the architecture of apartheid ideology and governance (see Van Ommen & Painter, 2008). And so, while it is my contention that a psychopolitical orientation must center a psychology in Africa if it is to be relevant to the people it claims to serve, what is required is a different kind of psychopolitics. One that is focused on explorations of Black life in terms of its live-ability and thriving, not death and dying or as part of separatist political projects. Stevens (2018) has argued that mental health in Africa remains indebted to a Fanonian engagement, particularly his analyses of violence and mental health. Most recently, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* journal has published a special issue on Fanon titled *In Dialogue With Fanonian and Southern Thought* (Ratele, Suffla, et al., 2021) and edited by Kopano Ratele, Shahnaaz Suffla, Mohamed Seedat, Mireille Fanon Mendès France, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. These engagements attest to the continued importance for engaging Fanon not only in general psychology but also for a Global South context. Fanon's (1967) *Black Skin White Masks* (BSWM) remains a critical analytic reference point for understanding what he termed a *psychopolitics* of mental well-being, that is the idea that political and social factors were fundamental to understanding the psychological life of the subject. Written at the height of colonial rule, Fanon's task in BSWM concerns at least three interlocking problematics that constitute his psychopolitics: (a) understanding psychological life via registers of

the political, (b) understanding political life and power via registers of the psychological, and (c) understanding how we may consolidate these different registers as a form of resistance against effects of power and violence. Through these problematics, Fanon attempts to theorize fragmentation and pathologies of mental health by developing an understanding of political and economic life and their interwovenness in psychological life. This is his psychopolitical project. Put differently, what does it mean to be psychologically free and psychically well-balanced in the face of systemic racism, poverty, political oppression, and so forth? Fanon's tenet that psychology as discipline cannot shy away from the broader politics and social arrangements that affect people's mental well-being is one that resonates in Ratele's African psychology. Both Ratele and Fanon take up the project of also engaging an analysis of social and political life via register of psychology. That is, both scholars see a value of understanding political formations through psychological lens that helps us to understand how affective life takes shape within the realm of the political and social. An example here is a consideration of the ways that psychological registers of rage (intertwined with hate and sometimes love) may surface within social and political domains that in turn influence policies and laws affecting a citizenry. Last, both these scholars argue that the realm of the psychopolitical is instrumental when considering processes of resistance and liberation. To address the psychic effects of a history of racism and oppression, it is imperative that the psychological and affective logics of systemic oppression be named and dismantled. And so, the work of resistance and liberation is not only structural and material in form but also psychological.

Although similar in parts, Fanon's psychopolitical project is distinct from Foucault's project: Fanon's quest is not a disassembling of psychiatry or the psy-complex regime more broadly but rather a recovery of alienation that is inherent within these regimes. Put differently, Fanon does not seek to eradicate psychiatry but rather to redeem it. His project is centered on addressing psychiatry's alienating techniques of power as a route to a truly healing and relevant profession. The psychoexistential complexes that Fanon explores in his work incorporate, such as alienation and disconnection, are thus treated with a social and political strand that considers how systemic racism may inform these psychoexistential complexes to begin with. This is what he terms a sociogenetic approach. In this sense, Fanon's sociogeny provides an analytic lens that incorporates the dual registers of the political and the psychological (Kiguwa & Stevens, 2021). Fanon's sociogeny also demonstrates the constructed character—not only of categories of madness but also their inflection with race. In so doing, he challenges dominant race ideology's intertwining with psychiatric diagnosis to reveal disciplinary shortcomings and complicity in pathologizing Black subjects. Finally, Fanon's sociogeny provides a critical insight into the interior life of Black subject that is racialized

and oppressed within a colonial and racist regime. It is in this, especially, that his work resonates with Ratele's in the latter's exposition on Black African interior lives in a context of systemic segregation, poverty, racism, and epistemic erasure. The resultant alienation that arises from such status quo produces myriad forms of alienation: horizontal modes of violence (i.e., the violence enacted against other subjects proximate to one), alienation from self, one's community and culture, pathologized formations of relating with others, and so forth. Examining different registers that include language, culture, sexuality, and the body, among others, BSWM's remains an insightful exploration of alienation as it configures in racially hierarchical society. *The World Looks Like This From Here* (Ratele, 2021) similarly tackles head-on the failures of a discipline that is far removed from the majority of the population. Ratele unravels the conundrums of alienation and fragmentation rooted in systemic racism, toxic patriarchy, and classism to ponder on the liberatory possibilities of a psychology that theorizes from its own context, an African psychology that centers Africa and her people. It is with this that I now turn to Ratele's second strand of scholarship on Black interiority.

### **The (Un)freedom of Living and Dying Well: On Black Interiorities**

Interest in the interior life of the African subject is not new. Apartheid's and colonialism's murky histories in Africa attest to this and were very much part of the systems of logic and governance that legitimated them. The African/Bantu personality and body have been a source of fascination within these regimes' logics of governance stretching from intimacy, health, contact, education, labor, and sexuality (see Butchart, 1995, 1997; Van Ommen & Painter, 2008). So, the return to a theorization and reflection of an African psychology, that is focused on interior lives of the Black African subject would undoubtedly invite some reservation. This is a potentially murky terrain that Ratele alludes to when he writes: "though there is little on the subject of the interior lives of African people to be found in psychology ... there is no a priori native world for which I am arguing" (Ratele, 2005, p. 557). How then to destabilize the notion that there is an "essence" to the African subject? Or if we say that there is indeed such an essence, what is its composition and history? Or are we concerned rather with the excavation of alternate forms of knowledge about this (essentialized) subject? Part of the work that Ratele undertakes (Ratele, 2005) is simultaneously a historical excavation of the intricate ways Black interior lives were rendered familiar and unfamiliar. Indeed, one thing South African psychology today must address: the genealogy of its own targets and objects of knowledge and the subject, such as the African personality. One may even speculate further: to what extent does apartheid ideology of separate development<sup>2</sup> translate into current ideas about the

Black township and informal settlements in South Africa as part of Black embodiment? Nkosi (2021) provokes this destabilization of Black geography in South Africa when he questions the taken-for-granted status of townships as part of spatial geographies.

So how does he go about navigating this terrain? Put simply, how to speak of an African psychology that is attentive to the dangers and problematics of essentialist reproductions of interiority? It is perhaps here as well that we are able to see some of Ratele's significant deviation from some of the current theorizations of African psychology in the literature. Ratele's attention to the psychopolitics of living and dying well as part of the psychoexistential complex of the Black subject in a postcolonial and postapartheid world is also a critique of a discipline that inspires a sense of disorientation in its failure to attend to the politics and intersections of living and dying well (Ratele, 2021):

If the assumption that racism and global capitalist culture have an abiding interest in people's intimate lives is reasonable, what makes little sense is why African scholars have not sought to make us understand much more clearly the intricacies and paths of colonial and apartheid policy makers' curiosity in interiority and private relations. (Ratele, 2005, p. 570)

There is a conundrum at heart here: What to make of the idea of a free social and political subject that exists in a world that unreservedly continues to be anathematic to that subject? Afro-pessimist scholar Calvin Warren elaborates that, "the juxtaposition of 'free' and 'Black' collides two disparate grammars into chaotic signification and conceptual devastation: 'freedom' is the terrain of the living, of the being we call 'human,' and 'Black' is the territory of existential dread, nonfreedom, and the being we might call 'object'" (Warren, 2016, p. 107). Ratele offers a less despairing outlook, preferring to explore questions of Black interiority in terms of both the limits and sites of freedom. His is neither a bleak conceptualization of Black freedom that negates any hope of freedom nor a romanticized or naïve claim to a free Black subject. Bridging these rigidly opposing views Ratele's African psychology favors a reading of Black interiority that traverses across temporalities and formations of self while attending to historical traumas and formations of subjectivity amidst past and continued trauma. In a similar vein, Gordon et al. (2018) urge a reading of the Black existential condition without exclusive recourse to pessimism and fatalism. For Gordon (2020), this distinction between anti-Blackness as a historical fact or social death and anti-Blackness as an ongoing project that may inspire counterworlds and new imaginings of Black freedom is an important

<sup>2</sup> Official policy entrenched by then Prime Minister (and psychologist) Hendrik F. Verwoerd in 1958 that enacted and oversaw the distinct separation of Blacks and Whites in South Africa. The Separate Development Act was legitimated via recourse to moral and psychological justifications for separation of different races.

one. Decolonial scholarship in the discipline has foregrounded the necessity for delinking from logics of colonialism that influence current knowledge and economic, cultural, and social systems (see Mignolo, 2007). Indeed, situating the discipline of psychology in Africa firmly within the legacy of colonialism and apartheid is a critical starting point that demands alternate theorizations of personhood. Christian's (1988) "The Race for Theory" remains an important critique of the erasure of Black theorizing. She is worth repeating in some length here:

People of colour have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing ... is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (Christian, 1988, p. 68)

In his demand for a different kind of psychology in Africa, Ratele implicitly engages the promise and possibilities for a view of the Black subject that is not encumbered by White history and modes of centering (Ratele, 2015). Refusing the pessimistic disavowal of a free Black subject, he instead invites us to consider: What would psychology look like sans the conceptual language of the subject within which it is currently embedded? What would such a psychology, not fixated on a marginal status as a subdiscipline, but rather as a *centered discipline* mean for understanding African interior lives? These questions are important in their situating Black interiority outside of a White gaze. In centering Africa and African worldviews, Ratele offers a reflection on temporalities, including modernity, that recuperates African worldviews on personhood and community. Interlaced with considerations for psychological freedom, his work engaging Black interiorities acknowledge this complicated feature of Black interiority within an anti-Black world as well as historical connections of present temporalities (Ratele, 2021). I now briefly discuss these two features.

### ***Anti-Blackness as Vicious Form of Sovereignty***

In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe (2019) offers a notion of sovereignty as "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (p. 14). This instrumentalization of human bodies simultaneously takes meaning alongside other notions of reason, unreason, and insanity, such that our understandings of these terms are reconfigured. They are reconfigured in ways that invert, so that what may be deemed unreasonable becomes reconfigured as reasonable, and what may be termed as resembling insanity may be reconfigured as sane and normal. And so, in these political and institutional moments of reconfiguration, it becomes possible for 1,418 bodies to be starved and tortured and 144 bodies to meet their deaths from the same treatment in a mental institution. It becomes

possible for the right to live to be denied to some bodies because of their sexual orientation and practice. It becomes possible for genocide and other forms of human rights violations to function as part of the norm of a state and society. Political histories of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid also mean that intersections of race, social class, and other asymmetries of identification influence the racialized and gendered configurations of necropolitical power (Ratele & Malherbe, 2022). Warren (2016, p. 107) thus rightly describes this configuration of necropolitics as inherently "anti-Black" and therefore embodying a "vicious form of sovereignty" (p. 107): "... what type of mental health is possible for a captive in a condition of unfreedom? ... Freedom and Life become impossibilities for Blacks in an anti-Black order." In a world where to live does not necessarily constitute living, the fact of being alive may in the end just entail choosing between two different deaths—the social death that is literal and the mental death that is part of a psychoexistential numbness (Warren, 2016).

But even in its extreme events of instrumentalization and destruction of bodies, living in an anti-Black world means that these spectacular events may blindside the everydayness of Black suffering (Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). Against these spectacular moments, it is easy to ignore or downplay the abject poverty that is a significant part of how much of the majority Black populace lives, the exposure to violence—structural, embodied, and psychological—that is also part of their lives and the unequal access to education, career, and wealth-generating opportunities. These social, political, and structural realities influence the degree and nature of freedom that one may enjoy. And so, if "psychological freedom, being such a historically inflected, dense, context-dependent phenomenon, is a founding supposition of African psychology" (Ratele, 2019, p. 205), what then must be its conceptualization? When the configurations of living and dying well within an anti-Black society mean that many Black lives must grapple with state, social, material, and structural entities that do not invest and have no real vested interest in their well-being?

### ***Intimate Lives: The Personal Is Indeed Political ... and Historical***

Building on the critical scholarship of Black psychologists such as Manganyi's (2019) *Being-Black-in-the-World*, Ratele's reflections on the biopolitics of Black interiority continually insert state interest in Black interior lives as significant to the project of exploring Black interior lives. Tracing apartheid government's interest in Black interior lives is an important historicizing of interiority as a political project of separation, control, and discipline. Manganyi's classic text published in 1973 and re-printed in 2019 (Manganyi, 2019) analyses highlight four key sites via which the apartheid state exercised and governed Black interiority: the body, community, and relation to material objects as well as time. His analyses align with

Biko's (1978), Fanon's (1967), and Du Bois' originally published 1902 (Du Bois, 1989) problematization of Black interior lives via alienation to oneself and the world at large. It is this rich history of exploration that Ratele's reflections build on. Exploring interior lives as part of a social and political arrangement that have histories, Ratele aligns with a core feminist tenet that the personal is political. Ratele goes even further to assert that a full understanding of the challenges and possible solutions to social and political transformations in Africa at large is that a serious concerted look at how its citizens' intimate and interior lives are configured—in relation to structural and material and political formations—is crucial.

Ratele's project is far from a focus on intrapsychic formations sans the social and political contexts within which these may arise. Indeed, a return to an exclusive intrapsychic explanatory lens that fails to address the social, political, and historical legacies of racism is a return to a form of psychology in Africa that has been complicit in the pathologization of the Black subject. Early literature on the "African personality" and the Bantu (see Van Ommen & Painter, 2008, for an overview) has been effective in the scientific racism that constructs erasure and insertion of Black interiority have been deployed in dual manner: "there is no Black interior life" and "there is a Black interior life that is desirous of governance." These concepts have served as racializing tropes to legitimate state control and discipline over the Black populace under the apartheid regime and under colonial rule more broadly. In Ratele's (2004, 2011, 2013) conceptualization, Black interiority is read against a historical, social, and political backdrop whereby:

There is therefore a need to look into how people can live better against a history and dominant culture that warps their structures of feeling, being and relating. (Ratele, 2005, p. 559)

How we develop our interior worlds against a backdrop of ongoing poverty, lack of privacy, historical and ongoing trauma, violence, and so forth is part of this exploration. His theorization further attends to the normalization of privileges of living well—such as having a personal physical space of one's own in a household that does not confer privacy. In his question: "how does one do intimacy" (Ratele, 2005, p. 563) within such context captures the heart of some of the questions that we must ask about Black interiority more broadly. Given all of this, I think of Ratele's questions of Black interiority to be a form of contemplative melancholy (Flatley, 2009) that seeks to recuperate Black African lives and living. This latter project involves thinking about each other and ourselves differently. Caught between the failures and promises of a postcolonial moment, part of our task is to avoid a tempting slippage into learned helplessness and afropessimism that renders us useless to our own healing. The other task is to begin a different kind of relationship to what ails us, the project of self must be revisited. This is the first site for an African psychology (Appendix B).

## Conclusion: African Futures, Toward a Psychopolitics of Hope

For only when we have searched do we find our homes and place in the world. (Ratele, 2007, p. 76)

Reflections, debates, and approaches to engage a relevant African psychology are not new and have been a significant but still incomplete project of South African psychology since the 1990s. Ratele's scholarship and activism are part of this critical history but perhaps it is his scholarship on African psychology where he offers us clear paths for forging a critical language, orientation, and method for how we might begin to reclaim a more relevant psychology for Africa. This article invites readers to rethink the disciplinary boundaries of psychology via an orientation to the particularities of contexts not typically discussed in much Euro-Western psychology. In so doing, I consider the work and activism of the South African psychologist, Kopano Ratele, whose oeuvre demonstrates the depth of recentering that is necessary for how we may imagine anew the possibilities of psychology in Africa. Through his African psychology, Ratele offers us five key registers via which we may begin this project. These include critical masculinities studies, critical studies on culture and tradition, Black interiority, and African psychology as distinct orientation that takes as its starting epistemological lens the location and context of Africa—as a geographical fact with unique histories of colonialism and slavery, as well as a context rife with diverse and rich cultural practices and beliefs that are fundamental to any project of healing and being-in-the-world.

Ratele's African psychology explores the need to make certain things thinkable if we are to reimagine African futures. African psychology's imagination of theorizing from Africa is part of this rethinking project. It is this thinkability that Ratele urges early in his reflections in *The World Looks Like This From Here*. What if we reimagined mental health as inextricably tied to social, political, and economic health? What if we reimagined Africa as a site for knowledge production? This is perhaps where Ratele's orientation is a marked challenge to Afropessimist reflections on Blackness and the human. Even in the midst of his grappling with the dire states of Black existence across the continent, there is a reaching for hope, an imagination of Black freedom. To understand the importance of Ratele's contribution to reimagining psychology and the Black subject as a subject of freedom, one would need to fully grapple with the different logics of colonialism and apartheid: the visceral logics of racism, the logics of symbolic violence in racism, the affective logics of racism, the political logics of racism, the economic logics of racism, and the logics of material violence in racism. *The World Looks Like This From Here* (Ratele, 2021) addresses these different logics and from there posits avenues for dismantling the discipline in its current form with a view to building something new that honors the psychopolitical project of recovery.

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(Appendices follow)

### Appendix A

#### Professor Kopano Ratele Addresses the PSYSSA 2016 Congregation in a Panel Talk Titled “Race, Science and the Future of Psychology”



*Note.* Photo credits: PSYSSA (used with permission). PSYSSA = Psychology Society of South Africa. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

### Appendix B

#### Professor Kopano Ratele at the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation, Cape Town, August 2022



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