



Article

Somewhere Between a Rock and an Outer Space: Regenerating Apocalyptic Education

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Abstract

As Black people, our everyday existence invites us to remember that anti-blackness is the foundation of modern civilization and has metastasized throughout every construction of civil society (Sharpe, 2016). Our existence within schools unveils them as self-replicating enclosures spawned by the plantation to undermine Black life (Sojoyner, 2017). In this paper, we use an Apocalyptic Educational framework (Marie & Watson, 2020) to share research on the biological (telomere) impact of schooling and anti-blackness. We aim to distinguish education from schooling and disrupt normative beliefs that more Black children accessing better schools will lead to their social, economic, and physiological wellness.

Keywords

Apocalyptic Education, Anti-blackness, School Abolition, Black Wellness, Re-membering

Introduction

Announcements^{1,2}

AE Session 3

Weekly reminder 1:

“The schools we go to are reflections of the society that created them. No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free.” - Assata Shakur

Weekly reminder 2:

Call and response. The *Journal of Future Studies* has invited contributions to a special issue on the Future of Black Education. We feel our support group for those of us who are working towards living a life beyond schools might offer important information that is appropriate for the call. In fact, we already intended to share a presentation this evening about the research on telomeres we hinted at a while back.

With your permission, we plan to document and write up certain aspects of tonight’s session to submit to the journal. We think such a piece could help build on the initial framing of Apocalyptic Education. Hopefully this will help bring our collective grief work into conversation with other Black folks in the field of Education.

Although we will present the paper in a way that seems like a direct transcription of our time together this

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evening, we will actually be sharing a composite of the gatherings we've held with our colleagues, family, and community members during meals, workshops, hikes, and breakout room conversations.

These encounters have provided many clarifying opportunities to contend with anti-blackness in schooling and re-member the possibilities of the boundless futures available outside of our investments in harm. We hope your engagement in the present session is helpful as well.

Welcome and Introductions

(*Summer Madness*³ plays and eventually fades as participants join the group)

Group Facilitator:

Peace everyone and welcome to the session.

For those who are just joining us, we are educators, rememberers, and facilitators from Apocalyptic Education (AE). Apocalyptic Education describes a life-alignment process informed by a praxis that is grounded in a remembering that the ending of western worlds grants more opportunities for our wellness. It is also a transmission of African cultural ways of being that conspire on behalf of our survival and autonomy, aimed at quickening our movement to spaces that are uninhabitable by those who mean us harm. In short, AE is a posture, praxis, and wellness collective of Black Indigenous community members (Marie & Watson, 2020).

We recently gathered at a wake in observance of schooling's death and the last remnants of hope that success in schools improves Black futures (Marie & Watson, 2020). Although we have held space for our own and others' grieving for years, these meetings became much more regular and intentional after the funeral.

We're honored that a few people from that service decided to join these sessions. We also give thanks and welcome new folks to the group.

Grounding

Before we venture further, we find it helpful to engage in some collective grounding.

We invite you to readjust if need be and find a little more comfort, ease, and stillness in your seat.

Ok.

Let's focus on releasing the tension we may be holding in our bodies ... in the space above our eyebrows ... within our jaw lines ... our neck ... our shoulders.

Wherever we may be feeling tension, let's re-route it down towards the ground.

Now, let's take a deep breath in for 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1

And please hold the breath for 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1

And deep exhale for 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1

Good work.

We're going to engage in regenerative breathing again.

On this next breath, we would like to turn our collective attention to the ground we are currently connected to. As we focus on the Earth underneath us, we would also like to invite reflections on the way the ground is able to hold our weight, our chairs, and our bodies safely, securely. Let's really lean into this holding. It might be helpful to envision strong roots growing from you deep into the cool soil and making contact with other roots. Others might think of immense gravitational forces attracting and forging strong connections between our bodies and the Earth. Try to focus on this heaviness and attachment. We're going to use this next breath to offer collective gratitude and build from this generous holding, safety, and security.

As we breathe in for 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1

Let's focus on our relationship and connection with this space on Earth.

Please hold for 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1

And, with gratitude for the grounding and sustenance we're offered,

Let's release for 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1

Thank you for engaging in that.

We hope you are feeling a bit more grounded and present.

We continue to appreciate being able to practice these decolonial somatics that Resmaa Menakem (2017) endorses. We are going to return to them in our gatherings as we work to release and heal from the disintegration of our minds, bodies, and spirit that schooling demanded.

Posture

One goal we have for our group is that we develop a shared posture informed by the understanding that we're in a society founded on slavery that remains intrinsically anti-black (Bell, 1992; Jackson, 2020; Sharpe, 2016). Some of us may have noticed Sister Assata Shakur's words on this sessions' announcements. We so appreciate her reminder that this society will never provide, sponsor, or knowingly permit us an education that will help us regain our autonomy. We think this kind of stance helps us recognize that the state is taking a calculated risk in allowing Black people to work within or close to its schooling system, a system we understand as a vast self-replicating and reinforcing enclosure spawned as an extension of the ever-evolving plantation (Sojoyner, 2017; Stovall, 2020; Watkins, 2001).

Many of us in the group are waging war against district school boards, administrators, colleagues, department chairs, and governing bodies to transform the curriculum and improve our students' test scores, grades, graduation rates, and employment opportunities (Simmons, 2020). We endure threats and punishment for work that is derided as radical indoctrination, and, increasingly, illegal (Goldberg, 2021). Many of us also hold out hope that with time, savvy, and coalition-building, there may be enough cracks, fissures, and vulnerable points where we (inclusive of our students, colleagues, family, and children) might infiltrate and bend these schools against their very nature and towards Black freedom (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Love, 2019). In fact, this came up last session when someone in the group asked our guest, elder Haile Gerima, if he thought infiltrating these systems is a worthwhile strategy for Black people to gain more influence and self-determination over our lives. He responded:

I can't speak about infiltrating the system because I've never met people who came back out of that dragon's mouth ... From slavery till now, including the African colonial history, we have known infiltrators have gone but have never come back. There is a new plantation that has mutated to make us be confused. And I would not say people should not work wherever they work etc. I just always ask, "then what?" After you [infiltrate,] then where do you go? (Reelblack, 2015)

Let's take Elder Gerima's response as an opportunity to meditate on our group mantra:

Our struggle against violence is righteous. However, obtaining access, reforming, or hacking schooling institutions, violent outgrowths of the plantation, will not and cannot undo the operating logics of schools, the plantation-colony, or their parasitic relationship to our suffering. (Andreotti et al., 2015; Dancy et al., 2018; Wilderson, 2010)

This is always a difficult truth to hold. Like most revolutionary efforts, our daily commitments regarding schools come from our profound feelings of love for our folks and for the future. There is an adage that grief is actually an intense love trapped in our bodies that cannot be expressed internally: a love that has nowhere to go. Our grief is thus much more complicated and intensified by the fact that schools have not and will never reciprocate even the most measured expressions of hope, love, or faith we've granted them (Sojoyner, 2017, Watkins, 2001).⁴

We offer insight into the telomere data that inspired this grief group and that helps us sustain our posture. To assist us in this task, we have invited Tiffani Marie and Kenjus Watson, researchers from Apocalyptic Education who guided the wake for schools, to share their work with our group.

Method and Methodology

Tiffani:

It's a blessing to be here with everyone. Before Brother Kenjus and I share what we've learned in our research we wanted to talk about our process of gathering the information. I engaged in a longitudinal mixed method study with a group of 33 youth including nine Black students over the span of four years. We interviewed students, offered

interventions to address their stress, and observed changes in their telomere lengths (a biometric of stress-related aging) and oxytocin levels, a hormone involved in social bonding, memory, connection, and love. Telomeres are the protective caps on chromosomes that guard against cell deterioration. Telomere degeneration is quite normal as we get older, but can shorten more quickly over time for those who have incredibly stressful lives.

Kenjus:

And I collected three forms of data – with biostatistical (also telomeres), quantitative (an everyday discrimination survey), and qualitative (two focus groups of 10 participants each) – to learn about possible connections and differences in how a group of 44 Black undergraduate men at UCLA recognize and respond to everyday racism and their relative telomere lengths.

Both of us worked with invaluable support from Dr. Leticia Márquez-Magaña, the Health and Equity Research Laboratory Director, and Rebecca Mendez, the Health and Equity Research Laboratory Manager, in the Biology Department at San Francisco State University to collect, analyze, and report on inferences drawn from the student biospecimens.⁵

We will share our testimonies about this collective work through what might feel like a comparative case study (CCS) (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). We think this method roughly describes our intention to “trace across” secondary and postsecondary spaces important moments that inspired us to release our hope in schooling and engage education so that we and the young people we work with can heal.

As “re-memberers” we aim to abolish the ways we have been programmed and seasoned by the academy to understand the practice of science as disciplining (McKittrick, 2021). Like many of you, we attempt to hold research as ceremony (Wilson, 2008).

Tiffani:

However, we are still casting the toxic remnants of the concept of “rigor” out of our heads and into their rightful place in the word “rigormortis.” We encourage you to absorb these data differently as well; holding the posture that Black wellness necessarily exists outside of the periphery and concern of conventional empirical and political approaches.

We hope to have some time for discussion at the end of these testimonies.

Tiffani’s testimony:

An array of youthful Black and brown faces colored the clinical glow of University High School’s Room 116. It was the first day of orientation for our program and a harrowing silence was more revelatory of students’ nervousness than their creased brows or jittery, cell phone-focused fingers.

Janie did not want to be in the room; she was instructed to join the program by her godmother Yvette, my close friend of 15 years. As other new students began to gravitate toward each other, Janie sat alone.

Prior to joining our program, Janie attended KIPP Bayview Academy (KBA), a neighborhood middle school that emphasizes tenets of “hard work” and “grit.” As a former 9-year employee of KIPP Bayview Academy, I knew all too well the school’s rhetoric and the oft contrasting reality of the students’ experience. Alongside their glowing test scores and college matriculation data, KIPP schools are also known for zero-tolerance policies that enforce captivity, submission, and social isolation.

When KBA students are “out of uniform,” disagree with a teacher’s curriculum, or turn to talk to their peers for that matter, they may be ostracized and sent to In School Suspension (ISS). ISS resides in the school’s basement, far removed from peers and other social worlds. Students sent to ISS are directed to sit alone, shift their posture, and re-write the school’s policy on thin blue sheets, all tactics meant to monitor their behavior. Solitary confinement breaks young people into submission; it systematically shatters the hope of Black children. There is a legacy in the hunch of their backs, a history in the curves of their spine, one that leaves them pinned under debris misnamed delinquency.

Janie had both served time in ISS and witnessed her peers go down as well. In fact, she spent years within KBA’s rigid structure, learning her content standards at a particular cost. While KBA teachers and administration were concerned with the control of students’ bodies, how neatly they stood in lines, when and for how long they could

frequent the restroom, they disregarded the health and vitality of those same bodies.

Outside of KIPP, Janie lived in Bayview Hunter’s Point. Bayview kids play tag in blood-stained streets, dodging bullets intended for their older cousins. Little boys shoot in Bayview, both basketballs *and* guns. And when they shoot guns, they close their eyes and squeeze the trigger; it is what some believe to be a rite of passage, their version of Blind Man’s Bluff. When midlife crisis hits at 12 years old, we experience far too many days in which the angels arrive before the ambulance.

Little Black girls like Janie are hunted in Bayview. The predator’s anthem: “You cute for a dark girl,” followed by “Ey, come here!” They are grabbed. Targeted.

Janie leaves the toxicity of the streets of Bayview, only to receive more toxicity within school policy and practice at KBA. There, and in many other schools, students are intentionally separated from their peers and support networks. This is often done out of fear that they may be distracted by their friends or sometimes from naive understandings of how to facilitate learning. And when students like Janie are separated from supportive peer groups, and even punished for attempting to re-forged those relationships within the classroom, the outcomes always disadvantage the child.

Much like the images of late 19th-century lynchings, students like Janie are literally and figuratively left hanging. Like many slaves, Janie was born with a noose around her neck. Her formative years reflected a process of the tightening of that noose. In school, her teachers punish her for kicking and screaming, the response to her societal nooses tightening. Her teachers fail to understand that kicks and screams are organic responses to strangulation. Historically, onlookers would pose, sometimes smiling, in front of dangling Black bodies. Within schools, educators evoke this same practice when they fail to engage and confront the devastating impacts of racism, poverty, and neo-colonialism within their classrooms. KBA teachers’ practices represent the everyday structural and interpersonal violence that sustains poor health for Black children.

Janie came to us kicking and screaming. Her peer group from Bayview had attended the local KIPP High School and again she was alone. Preliminary telomere ratio data seem to suggest that the ongoing embodiment of toxic stressors that Janie experienced throughout her formative years, coupled with institutional decisions to separate Janie from her communal networks, were killing her. While we were able to recognize that she came to us fighting, we would later realize that she was fighting for her life. When she heard our program’s promises of care and college, she thought of her teachers at KIPP. We share the transcript of our conversation with Janie when we asked why she initially resisted our program:

1:48: ((Looks down, slight grin)) I didn’t like school-

1:51 BECAUSE I WENT TO KIPP

1:52: ((rolls eyes and looks up)) °and they got on my nerves at KIPP°

1:54: ((head turns left)) °they always over did stuff so°-

1:57: I DIDN’T LIKE SCHOOL

1:58: ((looks down)) and then, I thought it was going to be the same way-

2:00: when I got here

In our attempts to center Black youth wellness and to differentiate ourselves from the liberal promises and malpractice of previous teachers, our teaching staff invested in the pedagogical frameworks and postures necessary to support Janie and her peers in their pathways toward wellness. As adults, we decided to study educators whose work was undergirded by decolonial frameworks of education – sites committed to ensuring a sense of social belonging, sacredness, and indigeneity for our children. We traveled across the globe to humble ourselves, divest from schooling, or the ongoing investments in structural, institutional, and interpersonal forms of anti-blackness, and study models of education-- the knowledge, resources, and communities en route to our students' well-being. We brought our students with us.

Janie did well on the 12-hour flight; Our group of students and educators spent a week exchanging culture and

stories with Maori, Tongan and Samoan students and educators at an Aotearoa High School, Kia Aroha College. Before entering the school, we were invited to participate in a Powhiri, a ceremony that obliges visitors to declare if they are enemy or friend. Once we shared our intentions, as friends, we were escorted to where our youth would sleep on the school's premises. Specifically, they slept in the Wharenuui, or ancestral house. It is likened to the body of an ancestor and houses the stories of tribal lore, carvings, tukutuku, and paintings as a reminder of the strength and determination of Maori ancestors. When visitors are welcomed inside of the Wharenuui, they are considered friends, as they have been welcomed into a realm that is watched by the god of peace, Rongomatane.

Inside the Wharenuui, Janie did not initially feel a sense of belonging. It seems that just because a building professes a certain philosophy, young people do not immediately open themselves to the possibility of its promises. And the night before our students were to meet the students of Kia Aroha College, Janie gave us a list of things that she would not do. She would not: 1) talk to "those kids"; 2) share any of her work; and 3) "by no means" speak publicly.

The day arrived and Janie sat by the door of a classroom with her arms folded, much like our first day of orientation together. As class began, several Kia Aroha students huddled around Janie and asked her to share about her experiences growing up in America. They asked to take pictures with her and within an hour Janie had moved from the door, unfolded her arms, and immersed herself in classroom practice. That day Janie shared a letter she had written to Sojourner Truth, honoring her for her resistance and sacrifice. Kia Aroha students sat around Janie, elbows propped on thighs, leaning in, and listening to her offering. When Janie finished reading her letter, laugh lines pierced through her cocoa skin. I had never seen that smile.

Janie's return to the states was a smooth transition. For weeks, her peer groups strengthened, and she more intentionally engaged in our course work. The content was relevant, as she had just recently learned of her Nigerian roots and was excited about incorporating the new Yoruba words she was learning into the course. Janie's freshman year was one of extreme oscillation: normative adolescent resistance, turbulent friend breakups, occasional crushes. But we hoped to provide consistent structures that would support Janie's development as a sacred blessing, rather than punish her for her adolescent development. We sought to ensure that our educational framework mandated Janie's sense of belonging within a world in which Black children are seen as problems before they are seen as people. At the end of the year, we asked Janie to share one of her most memorable moments from the year. She shared:

When we went to New Zealand, and we all went on that like—we all went on a walk, and we were just talking, and we got closer over time, and I feel like anybody that went to New Zealand, um, we kinda have a bond together cause we all experienced different things together.

Medical research (Carter, 1998; De Dreu et al., 2011) suggests that what made Janie's interactions with her teachers and peers so transformative was that they functioned to produce a release of oxytocin in Janie, solidifying a type of social bond that was truly healing. Oxytocin is a chemical that supports attachment, loyalty, and protection. It is argued that the "administration of Oxytocin in humans promotes trust and cooperation" (De Dreu et al., 2011, p.1262). The types of social attachments that Carsten and others (Carter, 1998) speak of facilitate a sense of security and a reduction in feelings of stress and anxiety. The cultivation of spaces of belonging and its consequential production of oxytocin is part of an endogenous homeostatic: spaces which help to function as anti-stress systems (Carter, 1998). These systems have the "concurrent capacity to increase social attachment and other positive social behaviors, providing the additional indirect benefits of sociality" (Carter, 1998, p. 808).

In May, one month after returning from our excursion, Janie's oxytocin concentration was at 85.657 – the highest of any Black student in her peer group. Additionally, growth in her telomere ratio—the caps on our cells that protect our bodies; these caps are known to shrink with age and cumulative toxic stressors; they reveal our biological age—suggested a drastic reduction in her stress intake or at least a profound shift in the buffering of stressful events.

Figure 1 below shows the growth in Janie's telomeres. Janie's telomere data suggest that prior to her involvement in our program, she had experienced a tremendous amount of stress, with little to no buffers, rapidly aging her. However, Janie experienced tremendous growth in telomeres over just one year. "The stress response system is built to be calmed by social contact, initially through the soothing that comes from being cared for by one's parents as an infant. Normally, this wires the relief of distress to the presence of safe and familiar people" (Perry & Szalavitz, 2010, p.156). Janie's growth reveals a critical disruption of toxic stressors that experts suggest can happen through

strong relationships, particularly through supportive peer groups and with caring adults.

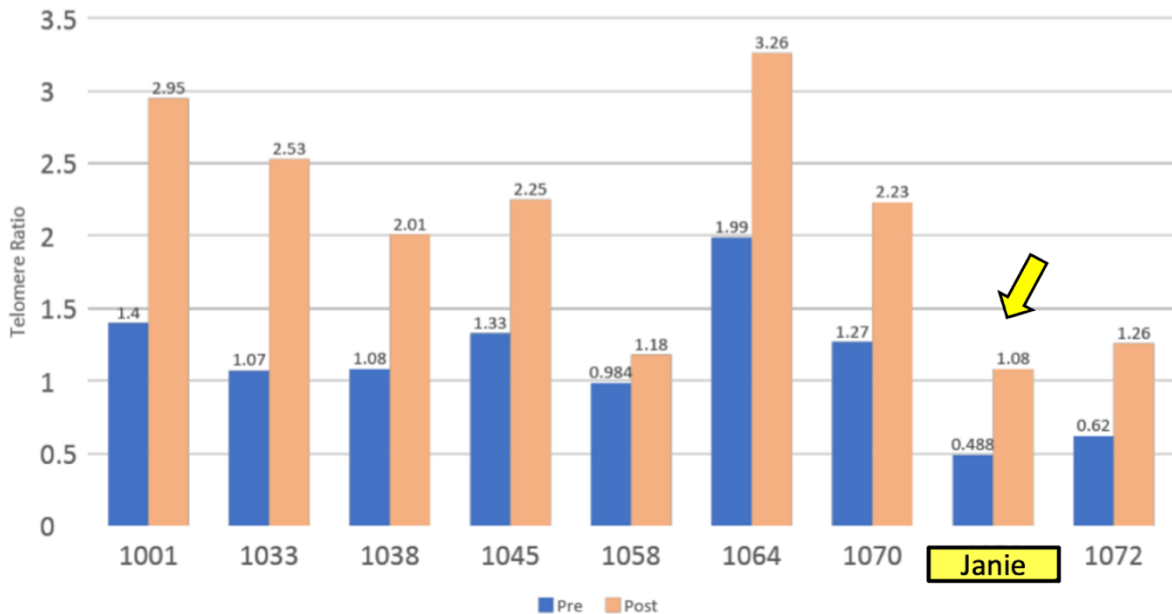


Fig. 1: TL Ratio Pre and Post

Currently, no facet of schooling values empathetic connection, simply because there are no formal measurements of it. Janie’s story reveals how we may collude in the killing of children when we fail to prioritize sociality and spaces of belonging in our school structure. To be clear, this is not just a call for engaging relationships in schools. Many others (Cronsnoe & Johnson, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lee, 2012) have written about the importance of relationships in the classroom. However, these texts use relationships as a means to a rigid end. These approaches still center increased grade point averages, attendance in core classes, and complacency in schooling as desirable outcomes of teacher-student and peer-peer relationships. Janie’s story reveals the violence in such a practice and helps us to understand that empathetic students who are deeply impacted by their relationships with others should be an essential and desirable outcome of schools. A school’s emphasis on empathetic connection does not necessarily need to be mutually exclusive from existing aspects of schooling such as A-G requirements. However, school success can no longer ignore the wellness of Black children in exchange for prioritizing so-called academic rigor. It is unacceptable to have children meet A-G requirements and be disconnected from others. This can no longer function as a criterion for success.

Kenjus’ testimony

I was inspired to study telomeres in my first year as a doctoral student during a season of sadness and confusion. In that initial term, my 59-year-old cousin died from his second massive heart attack. My three maternal uncles, all under the age of 55, were diagnosed with prostate cancer. And George Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering Trayvon Martin on the eve of my nephew’s 10th birthday. These events felt intimately connected.

When my cousin passed, he had been working full time and attending night school in hopes of obtaining his second master’s degree towards a promotion and higher pay. My mom’s baby brother, who had achieved the most academic and professional success in the history of our family, was faced with a more severe war with cancer than his older siblings. And when the masses of nonBlacks predictably joined Zimmerman in referring to Trayvon as a

thug, allies responded with memes and social media posts affirming Trayvon's "promise" as a college-bound student.

Prior to applying to PhD programs, I led cross-cultural centers on college campuses, taught courses on social justice, and collaborated with Black students and other students of color with the expressed aim of helping them to navigate and transform violent universities. However, as Black bodies were paraded in spectacle across social media, my students became increasingly uninterested in dialoguing with professors who derided them, peers who accused them of theft and desecrated their mourning spaces, campus police who stalked them, administrators who gaslit them, and drunken student "allies" who groped and assaulted them.

These unfolding realities called into question the very nature of my relationship with schools. The inherent plantation order of the university was suddenly, abundantly clear. And attempting to "transform" these pillars of settler colonialism no longer seemed appealing, possible, or worthwhile.

A pressing dilemma remained in the wake of this clarity. The dilemma is not too dissimilar from the posture we hope our group can adopt.

If the work of obtaining academic and professional success does not protect our people from the chaos of anti-blackness, if changing hearts, minds, and institutions (rebranded as "anti-racism") is dead on arrival, how else might we navigate a world predicated on our death?

There was no clear consensus or collective response to this question. However, one of my first-year professors mentioned in passing that public health scholars were examining cellular structures known as telomeres to better understand how we might best respond to stressors. This one comment prompted a deeper investigation into the biopsychosocial impact and response to anti-black microaggressions.

We carried out a study with 44 Black male undergraduates (1/5th of the 2017 Black male undergraduate population) at UCLA. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 26 at the time of the study.

I met Filmon, one of the participants, at an information session we held for those interested in the study. After my presentation at the session, he proceeded to ask some fairly technical questions:

Why are you using telomeres and not something like cortisol to look at stress? What's your control group? How are you operationalizing discrimination? What about confounding variables?

Filmon would later share that his questions were rooted in the scrutiny, skepticism, and doubt he had been disciplined to internalize during his pursuit of a STEM degree.

He had transferred to UCLA from community college, gaining entrance into the competitive Biology program. As the only Black student in a cohort of 500 Biology majors, Filmon grew accustomed to an intense, racialized sink or swim environment. Hundreds of his classmates in large seminars regularly refused to partner with him on lab work. When course instructors directly placed him into study groups, his peers didn't invite him to their planned meetings. A number of Filmon's professors presumed he was incompetent. Others questioned his academic integrity. He was isolated and invisible in the classroom but strikingly noticeable to campus police.

Filmon rarely registered these encounters or thought of them as racist. He had been socialized to remain focused, resolute, and hardened (resilient) in his quest to advance in school, obtain his science degree, and become a health care provider. He shared that:

"I didn't really notice when racism or microaggressions happened ... I would just stuff my stress. Isolation, frustration; whatever I felt. I would put it aside because I had work to do ... I was just always on the go."

As shown in Figure 2 below, Filmon also had one of the lowest telomere ratios in the study.

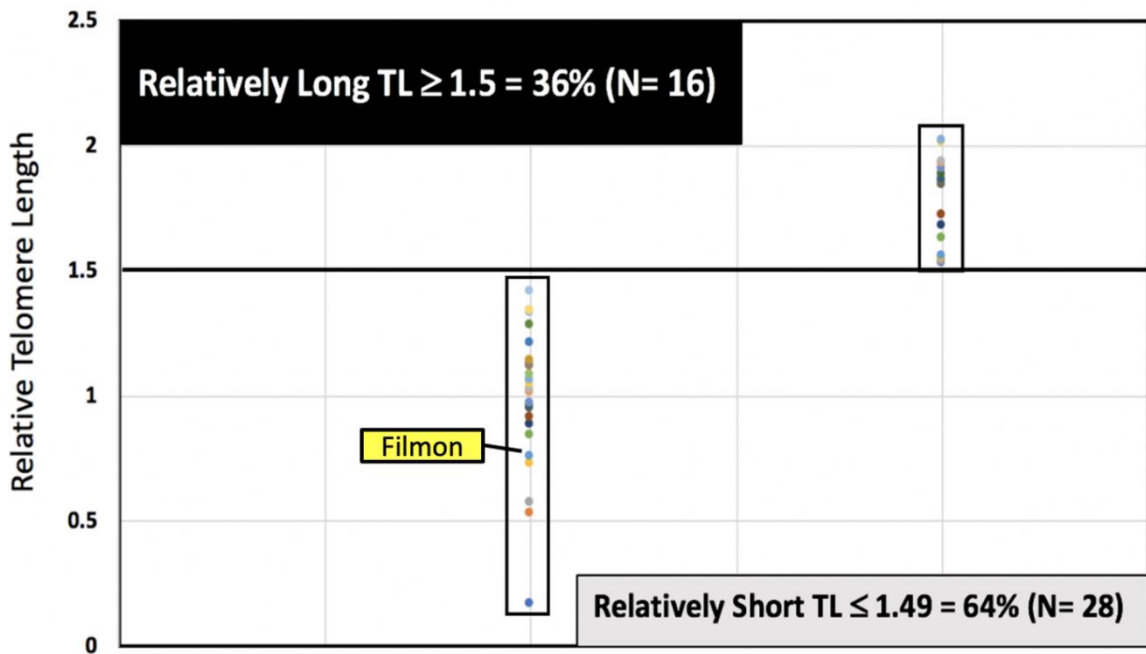


Fig. 2: Black Men at UCLA and Telomere Length (N = 44)

Filmon’s general orientation towards everyday anti-blackness was like most other young men (64%) in the study who also had relatively shorter telomeres and difficulty recalling experiences with racism at UCLA. When we asked the 10 students with shorter telomeres who participated in our focus group to map out their experiences with racial discrimination on campus, they collectively remembered enduring four racial incidents across the university over the span of five years. These incidents are indicated as red dots in Figure 3 below.

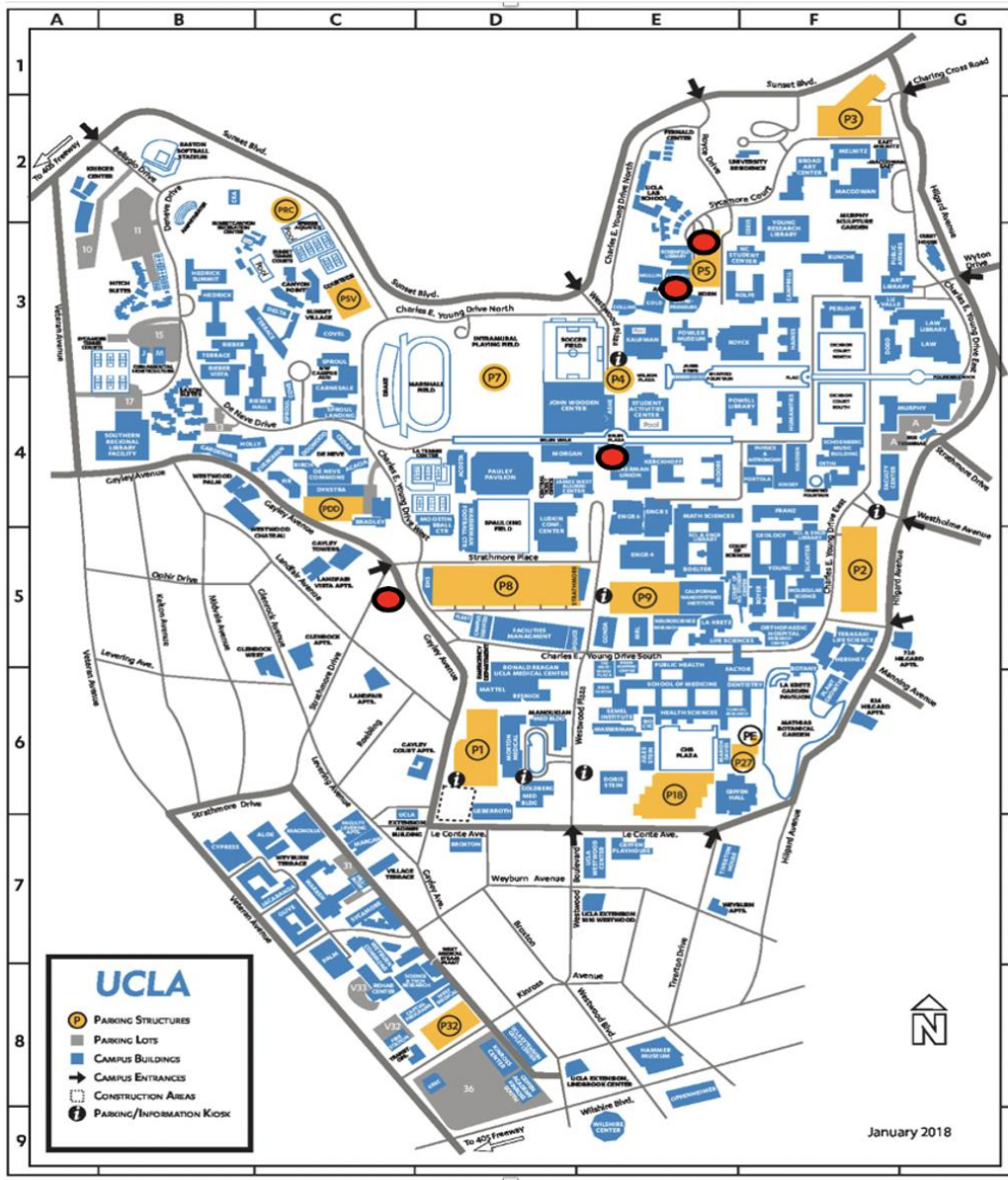


Fig. 3: Reported Frequency and Location of Experiences of Racial Microaggressions among Black Students at UCLA with Relatively Shorter Telomeres

On the other hand, the young men with relatively longer telomeres (36%) reported experiencing anti-blackness everyday across numerous locations on campus. And when we asked the 10 students with longer telomeres who participated in our focus group to share the frequency and location of their experiences with racial discrimination, they drew a very different map, displayed in Figure 4 below.

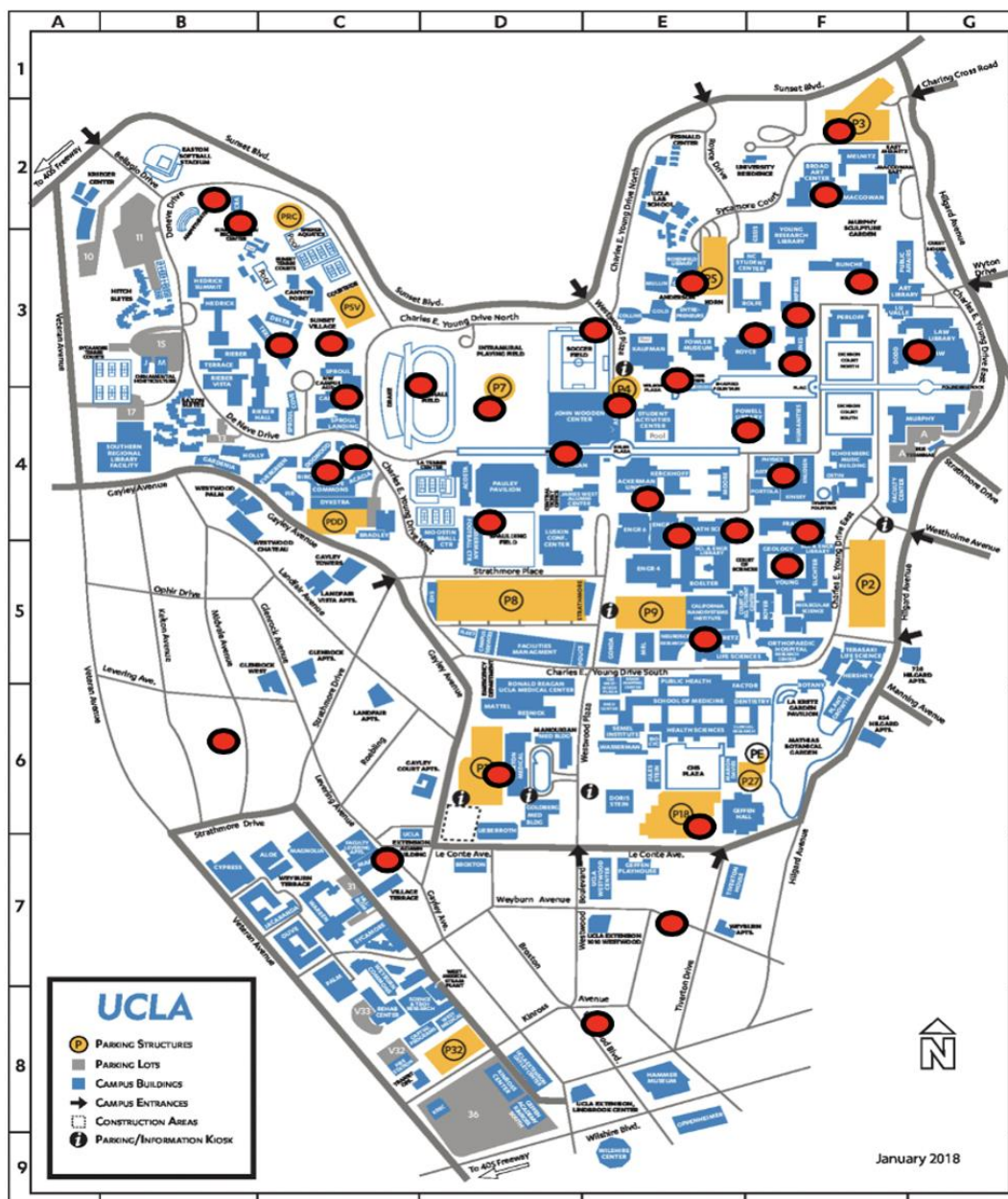


Fig. 4: Reported Frequency and Location of Experiences of Racial Microaggressions among Black Students at UCLA with Relatively Longer Telomeres

The telomere ratios and general dispositions of the two groups of students initially seem to contradict other work (Blackburn & Epel, 2012; Epel et al., 2004) that has linked accelerated telomere degeneration with more intense and prolonged exposures to stress. However, we learned through extended conversations with Filmon and others that all Black male students at UCLA were likely enduring similar *exposures* to anti-blackness but differed in their *appraisals and attributions* of these events.

For instance, when prompted, students with longer *and* shorter telomeres described frequent instances on campus when: 1) their mere presence sparked fear and anxiety in others; 2) professors accused them of cheating; 3) they were accused of stealing; 3) they were randomly stopped, questioned, and searched by campus police; 4) they were

the only Black person in the class, dorm, lab, social setting, internship, etc.; 5) they were confused for another Black person; 6) they were fetishized and touched by others without consent.

The students with shorter telomeres were uncertain and generally hesitant to describe these encounters as definitively racist. They also suggested Black students could lessen the possible harm of the events by not thinking about them, outworking their peers and disproving those who doubted Black capabilities, and developing sincere cross-racial friendships with nonblacks. The students with longer telomeres recognized these microaggressions as potent reminders and remnants of slavery and apartheid. Because they understood UCLA to be fundamentally anti-black, these students reinforced psychological walls each morning in anticipation of experiencing racism on campus. They made note of the time, space, and context of the microaggressions they endured. They sought out Black counter spaces as temporary refuge. They questioned, challenged, ridiculed, and ignored perpetrators of microaggressions. And they adopted a pessimistic standpoint about the possibility of not experiencing racism.

While we are careful to avoid the language of causality, these findings seem to offer a powerful testament to the critical consciousness-raising work many of us have been involved in (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). However, this inclination is problematized when we view the group of Black men in aggregate alongside a comparative sample of breast cancer survivors.

We learned that regardless of their appraisals, coping mechanisms, and response strategies, all the men in the study sample had telomere lengths hovering around the TL of women twice their age who survived breast cancer, as displayed in Figure 5 below (Aghaee et al., 2018). Approximately 30% of the young men in the study had relative telomere lengths that were similar to or shorter than the relative telomere length for women in the breast cancer study. Additionally, although the relative TL of the majority of young men are longer than the women from the comparison study, the two groups are far closer than anticipated given the extant literature connecting telomere length to aging (Epel et al., 2009).

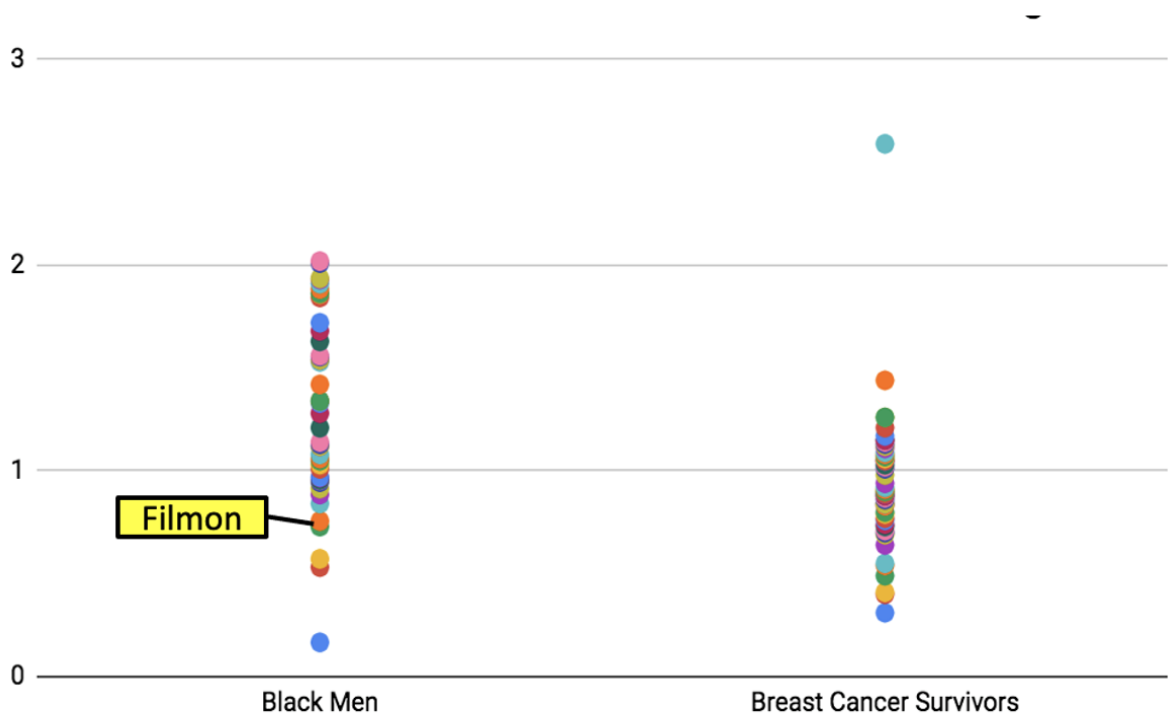


Fig. 5: Telomere Lengths among Black Men at UCLA and Breast Cancer Survivors (June 2018)

I called Filmon after he graduated from UCLA to share the sobering news about his and other Black students'

telomeric proximity to the breast cancer survivors. Much to my surprise, he said, *I was expecting to hear something like this.*

A couple of months prior to obtaining the study's final results, Filmon was assigned an open-ended paper in his last required class to fulfill his biology major; he could chart the trajectory of any disease of his choosing. Having just participated in the study, Filmon sought out research concerning Black men, telomeres, and health. He found an article that described a correlation between disproportionate rates of colon cancer in Black men and telomere length (May et al., 2015). and started working on his paper. The more he researched colon cancer the more he recognized the symptoms in his own body.

Filmon had endured prolonged intervals of stomach pain, general fatigue, and blood in his stool since he was 16 years old. He regularly reported these experiences with his health care providers. However, his physician downplayed his symptoms, prescribed softeners, dismissed the utility of a colonoscopy, and suggested instead the "redness" would subside if Filmon stopped eating Hot Cheetos.

As Filmon neared completion of his final paper, he took it upon himself to initiate the steps towards gaining true clarity about his health and well-being. His new physician did not think that, at 22 years old, Filmon was at risk for serious colon issues. However, the colonoscopy revealed a deeply disturbing reality. Filmon told me that:

"They found multiple polyps in my colon. And they had taken them out. They had found one that was 4 cm in size, another that was 2.5 cm, another that was 1.5 cm, and had to take them out in pieces because there were so many and so large."

Filmon was still awaiting a call to learn if the removed polyps were cancerous as he picked up regalia and prepared to graduate with his degree. Thankfully, the polyps were benign.

Closing

It is possible to infer from this work with Black students at UCLA that our health may in fact be compromised in relation to our presence within (and not our lack of access to) the very anti-black institutions considered fundamental to improving our life outcomes. We might also consider that Filmon's ability to successfully navigate the harshness of schooling did not necessarily support his well-being. These findings are helpful to the goals of this group, yet they also support a narrative that could delay our grieving process, stifle our work to release remaining investments in schooling, and undermine the necessity to embrace Black wellness.

For example, it is tempting to glean solutions from the UCLA study that feel "good enough" and "good for now" in response to the dilemmas that inspired the research. More specifically, the differences between students' understandings of race, appraisals of microaggressions, response strategies, and relative telomere lengths help justify our longstanding work to strike compromises with schooling (Givens, 2021). These findings do not necessarily challenge the perspective that, although we cannot expect anti-Black institutions of higher education to fundamentally change for the better, we can work towards changing our relationships to them (Grande, 2018) We can anticipate their inevitable violence (Ferguson, 2012), occupy their undercommons (Moten & Harney, 2013), analyze fissures in their defenses (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014) and empower our students to move accordingly while retaining more segments of their DNA.

When Tiffani and I first met and became familiar with each other's work, we realized the connection between our findings; Black youth were aging rapidly and heading towards premature death. The fact that Black students' enrollment in a top tier university seemed to exacerbate telomere degeneration affirmed Tiff's quest to enliven alternative paths and metrics of student success beyond college matriculation. These same study findings cemented my skepticism in schooling as moderately supportive of Black students. Having encountered Tiffani's work with high school students, I felt called to share the budding Apocalyptic Education practices with the young men in my own study at UCLA. Filmon's experiences are testimony to healing:

I immediately went to Eritrea after graduation [in 2018], which is where my parents are from. And I was there for six weeks. I was able to slow down. I was reading intentionally every morning. I spent time outside every day. I'm with my grandma, my cousins and uncles and aunts. They accepted me not because of something I did or produced but because of who I was. I didn't have to prove anything. It was really

a centering, grounding experience.

AE aligned with the intuitive practices Filmon had engaged since his trip to Eritrea. When Filmon returned, we discussed his move away from schooling and towards education. He stated:

I kind of carried over the practices from Eritrea going back to San Jose. Every morning, I walk to the park, sit by the same tree and I'd read for an hour and a half. I would read affirming words to myself. I would practice breathing every day. And I felt like this was meditative. This was my way of grounding myself. And I felt calm, cool, collected, the rest of the day, no matter what I was getting into. It's kind of like a re-indigenization.

Prior to his trip to Eritrea, Filmon's life was oriented to the timing, logics, and violence of schooling and his telomeres were severely damaged. As we *listened* once again to his cells in 2020, after an interval of two years, we learned that Filmon's praxis of Apocalyptic Education had coincided with the regeneration of his telomeres during the Covid-19 pandemic and additional major stressors. Figure 6 below shows the growth of Filmon's telomeres.

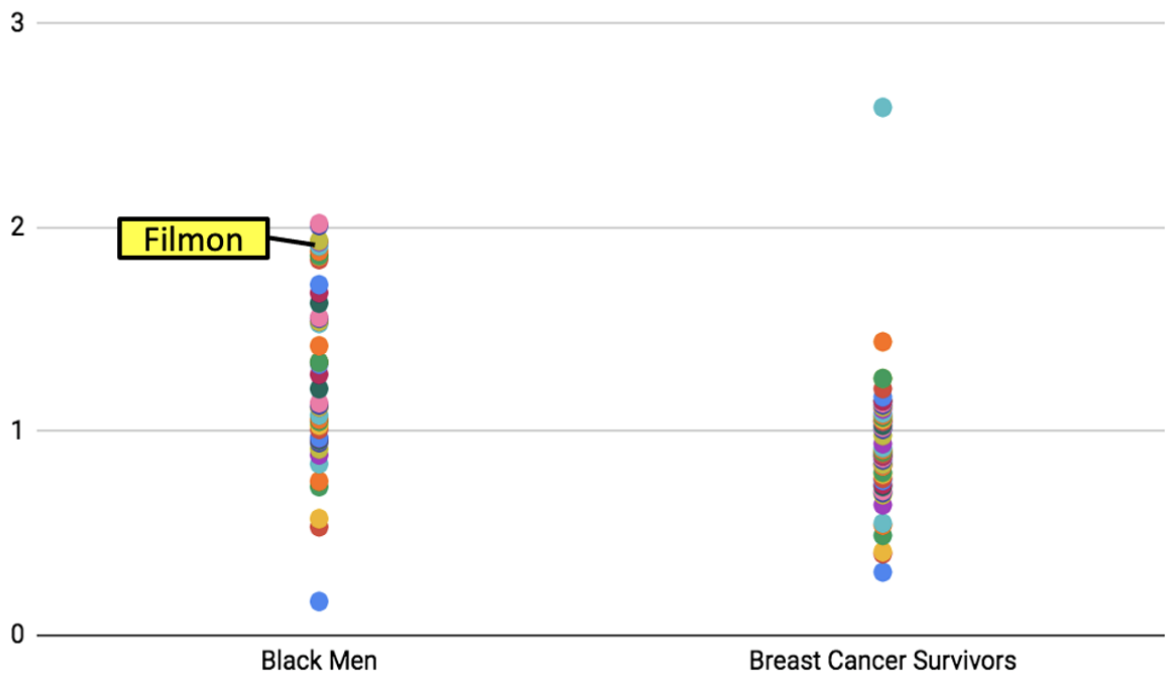


Fig. 6: Filmon's Growth among Telomere Lengths of Black Men at UCLA and Breast Cancer Survivors (October 2020)

Significance

Reflecting on our shared testimony, we rejoice in Janie and Filmon's journeys and maintain that beyond schooling, healing is possible, through grounding, grieving, and remembering. These findings help us embrace and welcome AE as a coping strategy and affirmation of a truth that many of us already know: Black wellness is not compatible with the requirements of schooling.

Facilitator:

Thank you both. We wanted to open our space up for comments.

Participant 1:⁶

I liked the presentation. Though to be honest, depending on who you're talking to, some of the data could almost be insulting. For grounded people, seeing growth in telomeres when young people stopped being schooled and instead connected with spirit is a given. I think the real work, the center of the work, is the fact that these findings are even considered groundbreaking. We should be asking each other, *Why is any of this necessary to say, to show? Why, is "How to stay alive" still groundbreaking for us today?*

Tiffani:

We're so appreciative of this. We completely agree and hope we can all deal with not just the data, but how it is hitting us. And I think, ultimately, the way we have been asked or enticed or forced to present this work in the past shows the efficacy of slavery and colonization. Our ancestors were prohibited from access to land, elder care, wisdom, and communal legitimacy necessary to maintain the health and wellness that would allow them to heal and sustain themselves (Lee, 2014; Somé, 1997). Today, for the sake of institutional legitimacy, we are required to engage the language of telomeres to observe the harm of a world built against us. We need to speak to caring and attached relationships (Perry, 2007; Duncan-Andrade, 2009) in order to talk about practices necessary to reverse the aging of our young people's bodies that are ravaged by the afterlives of slavery. We also engage the language of toxic stress to explain similar ideas. We are still being coerced to compromise with these dead places. We are coerced to seek out validation and legitimacy from the very systems that sought to destroy our knowledges and our capacities for autonomy and survival. This is why we feel an urgency to release our investments and to mourn.

Kenjus:

A few of us in this group have said these meetings can be disorienting and challenging in both what is shared and how we process. [I imagine the same may be true for individuals who are reading the journal article version of this session.] What we share here is heavy. Prison abolitionists work to dismantle the literal buildings that cage humans and the conditions that allow prisons to exist. Similarly, our grief work in AE seeks to bury not just our hope in school but in the ideology that suggests student performance, attendance, grades, compliance, test scores, compulsory advancement or punishment, college matriculation, or any other such indicator of "excellence" are preconditional for eating, being nourished, experiencing care, or having shelter (Bishop, 2017; Dancy et al, 2018). How we process this content violates the very ways of being that made many of us successful in school (and brought us to this room) in the first place. When we abandon hope that one way of life will continue, we open a space for alternative hopes (Bendell, 2018). As the process of remembering, grieving, and releasing unfolds, I wonder how many of us will return to this room in the future amid an inherently unsustainable global industrialist society. I wonder how many of us will write and (occasionally) read double-blind reviewed articles.

Tiffani:

This reminds me that many of us have been trained to focus on a particular group that's traumatized and needs intervention. We tend to believe we're the ones who are worthy to do the intervening. I think we may be the ones who have been harmed the most. And here is evidence of that. The evidence is that we're the people who don't trust something unless it harms us. Universities, graduate programs, fellowships, journals, test scores, assessments of all kinds are defined by their selectivity and distinction—the amount of people who are relatively rejected, denied, or worse. Somewhere between our attempts to prevent death within our communities and gain the resources necessary to respond to our people's death, some things have been lost.

Yet, we still can remember. My great grandmother's grandmother used local plants and tree leaves, like sassafras, to curate teas for medication. My mother's mother, Dorothy, Artelia's daughter, speaks of her elder's abilities to take hog hooves, essentially anything they could find, and ground them into ointments and other healing agents. Indeed, centuries ago, my ancestors professed that their indigenous knowledges centered the buffering of potential community dangers early, rather than an economic investment in the beliefs and practices that encourage them to intensify: *Dua a enya wo a ebewo w'ani no, yetu asee; yensensene ano.*

Participant 2:

I'm sorry but this framing is not working for me. Like...I think it is beautiful how you've framed this image of your family's use of their cultures. It's beautiful, really. But how can these healing practices you speak of feed me and my family? As an educator *and* a parent, I've been struggling with this conversation. So much of what you all are presenting resonates, but some part of me can't move forward with you all, definitely not at the speed that you're moving. I need some time with this. Your decision that schools are...dead? Is that what you're arguing? This is really hard for me to conceptualize. It is not that I don't agree that schools and schooling have been harmful to us, but to throw away schools altogether? That seems like a stretch; don't you think? What about the effective teachers within the system? The ones that fight so hard to protect and defend the humanity of my child? What is my child supposed to do during the day? I can't educate them myself. I need support. How are they supposed to make it in this world? Support themselves? It's like you're telling us to give up on the only system that gives us a fighting chance to protect ourselves and our families.

Participant 3:

You know, as a mother of four children, I also thought that there was something they could do *in this place* to change their and our condition. But what I've learned, is that bringing our children into this world was like bringing pieces of paper into a burning forest fire. And I'm trying to protect them, but they are paper, and are actually a part of--they're a component of a tree. But all of the trees—the entire forest, is on fire.

And I'm sitting here today saying to myself, what was I thinking?! I mean, there are these great moments with the paper--with our children--when we can read them and see the amazing universe they all contain and are capable of bringing into existence. And then there are times where it seems like that paper is just going to catch on fire and burn up and be gone right out of my hands.

I've had so many of those moments seeing this place burn my son, my daughters; it's changed me. I am forever changed.

I tell you what, if I knew back then what this place was...what you're telling us today, I would try to move as far away from the system as possible. And it's really difficult, because the whole world is based on that fire and it would be difficult to find a place that's not burning.

Although it might not seem like it, I am really hopeful for the future after today. Haha.

As we share this knowledge, maybe our children will be able to figure out how to get themselves and their kids and others through the place without getting as burnt. Maybe they'll get as far away from—from this hell as possible. And encourage other Black people to do so. And maybe after them, the next generation won't be as burnt herself and the next generation will be even further away.

Kenjus:

Thank you for this incredible analogy and testament of AE. As displayed in Figure 7 below, we see AE as a grounded re-membering and transmission of African ancestral and enlivened culture aimed at quickening our movement to spaces that are uninhabitable by those who mean us harm. Like many of you, we strive to re-member and enact AE as a praxis. In other words, when we move through the work, we start again. We did apocalyptic education with the young people, which confirmed we needed to let go of the dead project of schooling. We did the research with the youth because we heard them share the powerful impact of AE. We have shared our testimonies of growing closer in relationship to knowledge⁷ about apakan ipari⁸ (telomeres), to aid in this group's ongoing release of our co-mingled hopes in schooling. We are excited to be in solidarity with the Black educational futures of autonomy, survival, protection, and wellness that you speak to so powerfully. Your re-memories and collective wisdom have and will continue to inform our future movements. This cycle of education, transmission, exchange, re-memory, and survival has sustained us through multiple world-endings, sacred mourning, and visioning.

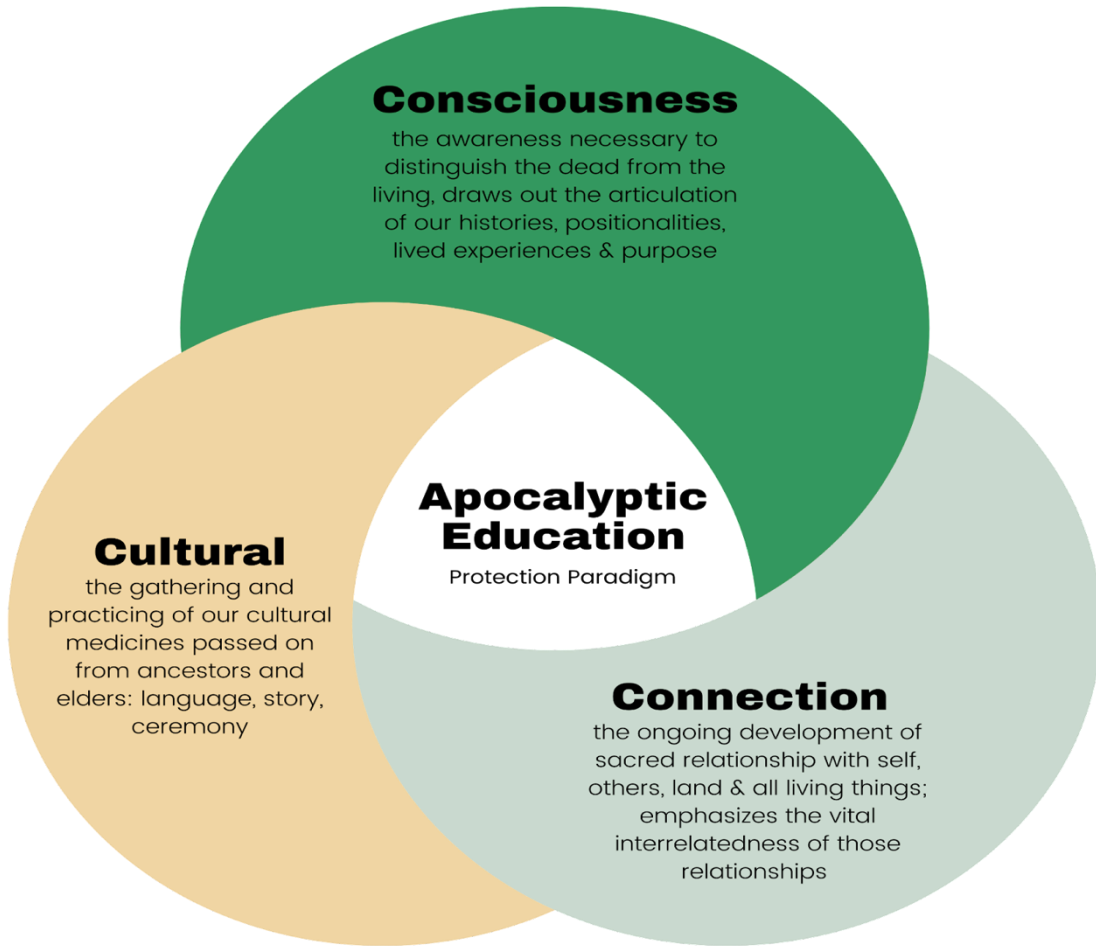


Fig. 7: Apocalyptic Education Protection Paradigm

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Notes

- 1- The paper is formatted creatively as the recorded documentation or detailed meeting minutes from an imagined Grief Support Group session intended for Black educators, practitioners, researchers, and others who are mourning the death of schooling as a viable avenue for increasing Black wellness. The authors, assuming roles of group facilitators, speak collectively and individually throughout the session and offer somatic practices as invitations for participants (or readers) to join in. Within this conceit, the authors share comparative case studies from their research documenting early biologic dysregulation and regeneration of telomeres to illuminate the

tensions and possibilities of Black educational futures beyond our current circumstances.

- 2- We invite the reader to think of these “announcements” as printed on physical flyers that are typically handed out and posted around the gathering space for group participants to read as they get situated before the session officially begins.
- 3- Find the link to *Summer Madness* on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQSI-rUUYqA&list=PLqfj-I5_e6xD8FIrdg6yl6V52fL3zyWDO&index=2
- 4- See (Marie & Watson, 2020) for details: Relative to other racial groups in the US, Black students who graduate from high school are more likely to: 1) attend community college in perpetuity (Iloh & Toldson, 2013); 2) become entrenched in the predatory, for-profit, Lower Education industrial complex (Cottom, 2017); 3) incur higher amounts of debt, borrow at higher rates, and default on their student loans regardless of the type of institution they attend(ed) (Jackson & Reynolds, 2013); 4) encounter daily institutional and structural forms of anti-blackness at purposively white and Hispanic serving institutions (Abrica, Garcia-Louis, & Chaddrick, 2020); 5) develop and/or exasperate existing mental health crises en route to degree attainment (Solórzano et. al, 2000); 6) and develop physiological disruption and symptoms of racial battle fatigue (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). High-achieving members of our communities are also: 7) less likely to graduate from all post-secondary education (Dumas, 2014); 8) less likely to obtain gainful employment after college (Smith & Stovall, 2008); 9) tend to lose financial gain obtained by their parents (Chetty et al., 2018); 10) are just as likely to experience incarceration as poor whites (Chetty et. al, 2018); 11) have a harder time evaluating Black people as positive on the Implicit Attitude Test (Dovidio et. al, 2008); and 12) experience increased vulnerability to stress-related diseases and premature death (Adelman, 2008; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Indeed, despite the persistent strategy to double-down on efforts to improve Black educational achievement as a pathway to social mobility, economic reports predict the median wealth for Blacks in the US will fall to \$0 by 2053 (Asante-Muhammad, Collins, Hoxie, & Nieves, 2017)
- 5- In both studies, participants were asked to spit into a commercially available saliva collection tube (DNA Genotek), which was labeled with the same unique identifier. The collected samples were transported to the Health and Equity Research (HER) Laboratory at San Francisco State University (SFSU). HER Lab Director, Dr. Leticia Márquez-Magaña, and the HER Lab Manager, Rebecca Mendez supervised and carried out the telomere measurements as established by the Cawthon (2002) method. The DNA they obtained from participants’ cheek cells in saliva Genomic DNA (gDNA) was extracted from buccal cells with the QiaAmp DNA blood mini kit (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer’s recommendations and was used to establish and validate the telomere length assay. In both studies, the authors corresponded frequently with members of the HER laboratory during the lab groups’ arduous extraction of high-quality DNA and strenuous analysis of telomere length. Once Rebecca Mendez and the HER lab obtained results that were reproducible for each of the participants, both authors utilized the data to analyze their survey and interview responses.
- 6- Participant 1, 2, and 3 responses and questions are composites from our engagements with Black parents, caretakers, and other educators.
- 7- Shawn Wilson (2008) refers to this practice as Indigenous science.
- 8- Telomere is Greek for “end part.” We encourage creative ruptures in the nomenclature of our sacred anatomy. Here we uplift “Last/End Part” in Yoruba.

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