



# FIREPROOFING BLACK FUTURES

*a partnership between*

**CSU LOS ANGELES**

AND

**APOCALYPTIC EDUCATION**

## Background & Context

At California State University, Los Angeles, in the College of Education, Black students, faculty, and staff continue to name the realities of institutional neglect, systemic anti-Blackness, and chronic under-resourcing. Following campus encampments, political silencing, and unmet declarations of equity, Black community members have been expected to respond with little to no support. In the midst of this harm, the question remains: What happens when accountability is absent? How do we show up for one another?

This proposal takes up those questions. Building on the “Protecting Black Sacredness” framework developed through the Institute for Regenerative Futures, it offers a version grounded in the specific conditions at CSU LA. It calls for the creation of a site-specific Fireproofing Framework designed to support collective healing, strategic resistance, and institutional reflection within the College of Education. Rather than deferring to external interventions, this approach focuses on generating conditions for wellness and belonging within the community itself.

## Fire-Proofing

The Raising Fireproof Children Framework was born from a conversation between Dr. Kenjus Watson and his mother, Terry. After hearing about the devastating findings from his research on cellular erosion among Black college students in Los Angeles, she reflected, “Bringing Black children into this world is like giving birth to pieces of paper in a burning forest. [We are] doing everything [we can] to protect those pieces of paper—who are themselves pieces of the people who came before us—but the whole forest is on fire.”

## Purpose

This initiative aims to build and pilot a Fireproofing Framework that supports collective defense systems against racial trauma within institutions where harm persists. It is grounded in three core components:

- *Cultivating and Protecting the Black Body (Culture): Through somatic and ritual practices, critical reflection, and storytelling, this component develops visual and narrative tools to document lived experiences, co-created and remembered wisdom, and pathways forward.*
- *Fireproof Architecture (Consciousness): This involves creating new frameworks that respond to harm—both metaphorical and literal—by rebuilding what has been lost, including Indigenous practices such as earthen architecture.*
- *Cross-Institutional Collaboration (Community): This focuses on strengthening relationships across universities to enhance our collective response to racial trauma and contribute to AERA 2026, in hopes that CSU LA can be positioned as a model for transformative, embodied, and culturally rooted equity work.*

## Guiding Questions

- How do we build capacity for wellness and resistance when the institution remains unchanged?
- What does it mean to live with integrity inside an environment structured by anti-Blackness?
- How do we fireproof—beyond survival—but imagine and create from the heat?



A large pile of reddish-brown granules, possibly coffee grounds, is contained within a clear plastic bag. The granules are piled in the center of the bag, and the plastic is crinkled around them. The text "SESSION 1" is overlaid in white serif font on the pile.

# SESSION 1

# NAMING THE FIRES

All of these places map themselves around Black people.

White women upstairs objectify me ; ask me crazy questions.

Administration gives me a courthouse vibe... I get anxiety just walking in.

I felt a sense of mistrust. How deep are these roots here to have such a building?

It's not just campus police. It's another kind of state presence... police intelligence.

The presence of the police state on campus creates a sense of terror, disaster, torture... all of it just there.

Black students are always the ones getting reported.

This is the first thing you meet coming off the 10, the state.

Students are surveyed all the time but never seen.

One neoliberal move is to put all the Black, Latino, queer radical voices in one space ; so they can be watched.

We're building community, but the surveillance is always there ; the admin is right there watching.

Any initiative for Black students becomes, 'This is what we should be doing for all students.'

This building is toxic ; lead-based paint, asbestos ; and the windows can't open.

The cross-cultural centers and diversity offices are there to police and surveil.

To have the state's presence but no place where you can just have fun tells you what the school thinks about its students.

Most of the reports coming from the police and housing were about Black students.

King Hall is known for its ecological oppression.



# THE EARTH & THE ARCH



## The strongest structures are arches.

We traced their truth on an eggshell and in the natural downward pull of falling soil to better understand how an arch becomes a protective force and a foundation that holds against both natural and unnatural.

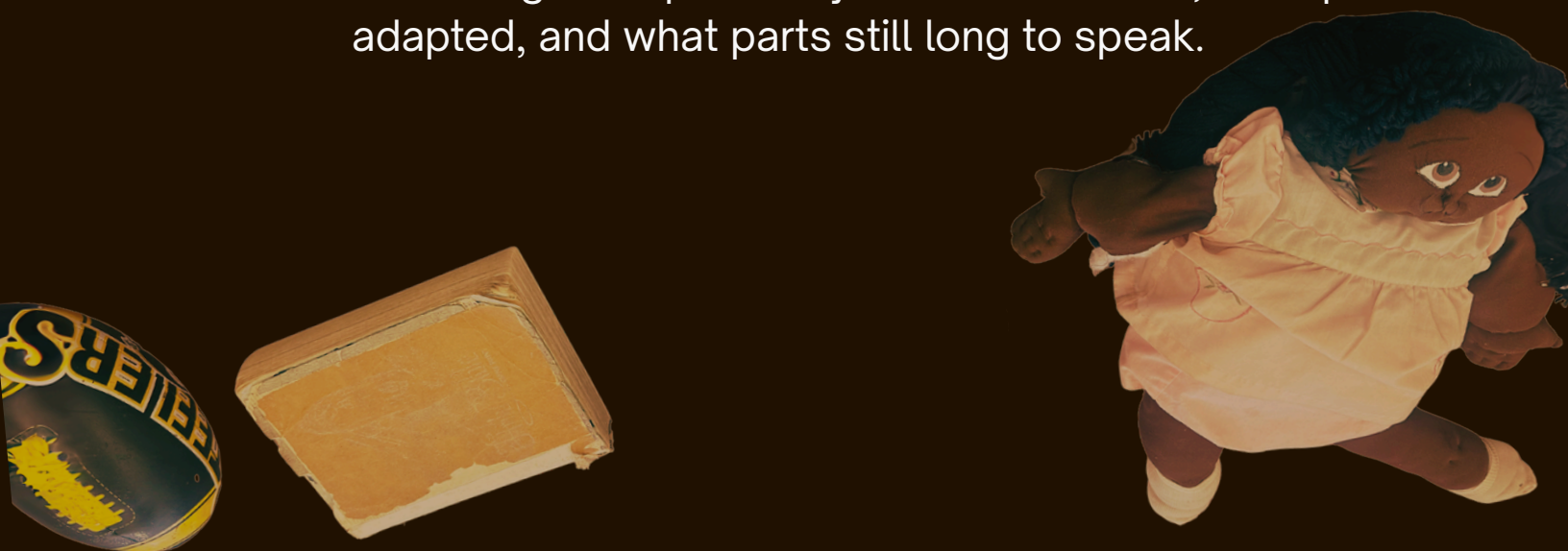
We concluded by studying how buttressing works; we learned that even the strongest structures still need support.



This toolkit begins with the understanding that inner child work *is* consent work. Before anyone tried to shape what we thought, many of us were first taught to control, mute, or contort our bodies, to sit a certain way, hide our displeasure, “fix your face,” or suppress our feelings. Those early interruptions to freedom taught us that our bodies’ truths were negotiable. As adults, those lessons continue inside us; they show up in the tension we hold, in the resentment we feel when we witness a child’s unfiltered freedom, in the long pause it takes to remember a happy moment from childhood because joy often lived next to harm.

Returning to our inner child is a form of memory work, and, as Toni Morrison teaches, memory comes like a flood, disastrously powerful, and transformative. Through that return, we can begin to see how many of the times we’ve said “yes” in our lives were required for our survival and/or fulfilling someone else’s expectations, rather than our own consent. To reconnect with our inner child is to interrogate those yeses. It is the act of reclaiming the yeses that were ours and to release the ones that were never freely chosen.

In this toolkit, we invite you to approach your inner child with consent at the center: asking what parts of you were silenced, what parts adapted, and what parts still long to speak.



What does a *yes* feel like when it's honest?

What does a *no* feel like when it's honored?

We spend years learning to think our way through choices, but the body keeps the earliest record.

**Consent is felt.**

These reflections are an invitation to remember what your whole body knows.

*Some of my yeses were celebratory, but some were yeses with disgust...my whole body saying, 'How disrespectful to myself.'*

*That one moment of full-bodied yes teaches your system what you want...so everything else becomes clearer.*

*It wasn't that the question stirred me... it was that my body did.*

*Forgiveness and grief are siblings; forgiving myself feels like mourning the dream I held on to.*

*When I was saying yes to things I didn't agree with, I felt betrayal...toward myself.*

*Shame is another exit from yourself. Meta (loving-kindness) is what lets you meet what shows up in your body with love instead of punishment.*

*I felt the yes in my whole body; my hands in the air, my chest open. The yes that wasn't a yes felt like my eyes rolling and my stomach tightening.*

*Sometimes I'm exhausted by being trained to read the whole person when people aren't reading me back.*

# THE YES RITUAL



# EARTHEN ARCHITECTURE AS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

## **Consent and earthen architecture share a critical pedagogy of deep listening**

Both require profound attention to what the body (or the earth) can hold without breaking. In building arches, we learn that structures stand only when they are properly supported and buttressed, just as an embodied yes requires its own inner scaffolding. The earth is profoundly forgiving; it lets us try again and again, and that forgiveness becomes a mirror for how our bodies long to be honored and cared for. When an arch collapses from lack of support or rises through careful attention, it becomes a powerful metaphor for consent, teaching us what it means to listen and respond with our whole bodies, from a place of deep love and forgiveness, so we do not break under pressure.





## **We began with grief.**

Before we built anything, we listened to what had been lost. On land marked by fire, we sat with Ms. Louise as she shared memories of raising her children, growing food, and living in relationship with a space that was no longer physically there. We built an altar to hold those memories, grounding ourselves in the understanding that nothing should be rebuilt without first acknowledging what it replaced. We learned that repair requires witnessing.

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## **In this toolkit, grief is a necessary part of the process.**

Without it, we risk rebuilding over harm rather than responding to it.



# THE LAND REMEMBERS

*We turned to the land as teacher.*

Even after the fires, the land held memory. We learned that where indigenous land practices had been restored, the impact of the fire was different. Native plants, soil relationships, and ecological balance shaped what endured. The land responded to how it had been cared for.

We were introduced to ways of thinking that rely on restoration. Practices like soil remediation through mycelium remind us that healing involves working with what is already present.

We learned that the land holds knowledge about survival *and* regeneration.

The land is an active participant.

**We are reminded to revisit this question: What does this environment already know about how to heal?**

# BUILDING AS COLLECTIVE POWER

## **We built together..**

Using earth and shared labor, we began constructing a bench and an arch. We followed the same principles we studied earlier: that strength comes through curve, that structures hold when they are properly supported, and that nothing sustainable can be forced into place.

The work was physical and deeply communal. We cleared space and shaped materials with our hands. In doing so, we confronted the idea that building demands permission. We also learned that building is a form of agency. It is the process of working together to create something that can hold.



## **Repetition.**

We repeated the process.

*Lay the gravel. Fill the bag. Place it. Tamp it. Set the barbed wire.*

**Do it again.**

Nathan says: *“These are the things that stick with you... the simple work.”*

Each layer built on the one before it.

In earthen architecture, strength is in the layering; the sacred geometry of its togetherness.



# APPLICATION



*“If you give someone a stone, it is the same as giving them a mountain.”*

## **As we built , we held a question:**

*How does this apply to the work with our students, and to our own sustainability in places that are not built for our wellness?*

We were reminded of a West African Proverb: *“If you give someone a stone to support them, it is the same as offering them a mountain.”*

This Superadobe bench is small. But it represents something much larger.

The process is the practice.

What we build here is not separate from what we are trying to build elsewhere.

# WE BEGAN WITH A DEATH MEDITATION



*Our session took place during the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting week, as scholars across the country gathered to discuss schooling. We gathered to build beyond it.*

Educators, professors, fellows, and community members came together on land to complete the bench and arch for Ms. Louise and her family. It was a communal response to the Altadena fires, but also the fires of state-sanctioned anti-blackness.

## **We began with a death meditation.**

Much of what we are asked to participate in, educational systems, institutional structures, frameworks of equity, continues to produce harm without accountability. Within these conditions, Black students folk are expected to persist, respond, to repair, often without the resources required to sustain their own well-being.

## **So the question guiding the session was not how to improve the institution.**

*It was: What/how do we build when the institution does not change?*

*Fireproofing emerges from that question.*

# **pieces of paper** BURNING IN THE FOREST

As shared through this framework, protecting Black life within institutional spaces has been likened to “pieces of paper in a burning forest.” The conditions are not neutral. The harm is not incidental.

The environment itself is unstable.

The work, then, at its least anyway, is defense.

We returned to the structure to complete it.

The bench was reinforced. The arch was finished. Layers that had been built over months were brought to completion. The structure now holds weight. It can be used. It can gather people. This distinction matters.

In earthen architecture, a structure is only complete when it can hold what it is meant to carry. The same question applies beyond the build: What are our institutions actually able to hold? Lalin, Ms. Louise’s daughter, grounded this further. This land held generations of memory and possibility for her family. The fires disrupted the structure, but not the relationship. Rebuilding here is deeply connection to continuity under conditions of loss.

At the same time, fellows from the Life-Sustaining Fellowship joined the space, bringing ongoing work centered on suicidality among Black youth through community-rooted, culturally grounded practices. Their presence made visible a broader truth:

While institutions merely document harm, our communities are already responding to it. Fireproofing, in this context, is a collective defense strategy.

It answers these questions:

- **How do we remember structures that can sustain us when systems do not?**
- **How do we move beyond survival and create under these conditions?**

The bench and arch do not resolve these questions. But they hold them.

*They stand as evidence that something else is possible because people chose to build differently within and beyond it.*





