

## Sequelae

by Rejjia Camphor

"I can't breathe" was not just a statement spoken  
when Eric Garner was being choked,  
it was a diagnosis for black folk  
under this token we pin U.S.  
Yet we still don't even know  
how to spell us, can't exclude us  
and still expect to spell understand,  
You still don't understand,  
this land is quicksand,  
been sinking ever since black  
was sunk to the dark place,  
you mean space,  
the same case we understand  
to not have any matter,  
is that why I don't matter?  
Because I'm not easily served on a platter,  
open season for you to play  
Grand, Theft and Batter,  
the only thing that should be whippin  
is me the hell UP outta here,  
buzz lightyear away from all this  
white fear and make it disappear.  
Cause up there is true reality  
blackness not just the only thing you see  
but how godly it can be  
giving me a supernova sense of what it means  
to have a purpose in this world.  
My whole meaning is to be a black girl,  
curve out and swirl like the expansion of the universe,  
give beauty to birth and help you nurse your worth,  
but instead you purse your verses with curses  
that know me as names that are not mine  
names that hit me like meteors crashing  
up and down and against my shrine  
I pray that you learn to not address me with this kind of foreplay  
Cause lord knows they only love women when it's the milky way  
But someday you may understand that I'm not your parfait,  
I am the antithesis of anti-black life,  
so when police put eric garner in that chokehold  
and squeezed until he was set free to the afterlife,

it was also like opening back his mother's portal  
and stabbing her vagina with a knife.

black mothering

is interchangeable with that of enemy of the state

the preservation of black life against the proliferating terror of hate

and sequelae is a medical term for the condition caused by those lingering wounds,

the slow death that happens long after they've built then vandalized his tomb.

Description:

"Sequelae" is an unapologetic and deeply reflective poetic response to Christen A. Smith's anthropological work, *Facing the Dragon: Black Mothering, Sequelae, and Gendered Necropolitics in the Americas*. The poem examines the gendered impact of anti-Black state violence, arguing that the deaths of Black men are not isolated acts, but also targeted violence against Black women—especially Black mothers.

Rooted in Smith's argument that Black mothers are scripted as enemies of the state, *Sequelae* critiques the state's role in devaluing Black life, the hypervisibility of violence against Black men, and the simultaneous invisibility, criminalization, fetishization, and disposability of Black women. The poem delves into sequelae—the slow, lingering harm of trauma caused by systemic violence and loss, which Smith argues is not just a consequence of oppression, but is an actually enforced, organized and resilient political tactic.

Beginning with the haunting legacy of Eric Garner's final words, "I can't breathe," *Sequelae* expands this phrase beyond a personal plea to a collective condition of survival under oppression. It links historical and contemporary violence, from enslavement and forced reproduction of Black women to the modern erasure of Black history from schools, underscoring how systemic violence is not an isolated event but an ongoing condition, a lingering wound—a sequela.

Through powerful wordplay, layered metaphors, and visceral imagery, *Sequelae* exposes how Black women are only valued within dehumanizing roles—as caregivers or sexual objects—but not as full human beings. One of the poem's most haunting moments parallels police brutality with violence against the Black maternal body, linking anti-Black racism to childbirth, public policy, and the justice system. Black women die at alarming rates from childbirth, at the lasting grief of outliving their children, and at the hands of police violence themselves.

At its heart, *Sequelae* is a rejection of misogynoir, fetishization, disrespect, and erasure, while celebrating the resilience, divinity, and strength of Black existence. Through imagery of space, supernovas, and celestial power, *Sequelae* reframes Blackness as something infinite, cosmic, expansive, and divine, offering an empowering counter-narrative to oppression. This poem is both a critique of systemic injustice and a reclamation of identity, urging readers to confront the ongoing sequelae of racial violence while declaring that Black women's pain, survival, and resistance must be recognized.