

“Countdown to zero’: Systemic Racial Oppression and Black Social Death in Wideman’s ‘Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies.’” Paper presented at “Can Scandal Promote Societal Change? Perspectives in Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture,” a special topics panel at “Scandal! Literature and Provocation: Breaking Rules, Making Texts,” the 92nd annual conference of the **South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAMLA)**, in Jacksonville, FL (transitioned to a virtual conference due to the COVID-19 global pandemic). Nov. 2020. [Watch the presentation here.](#)

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Abstract:

**“Countdown to zero’’: Systemic Racial Oppression and Black Social Death in Wideman’s
“Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies”**

John Edgar Wideman’s 1992 short story, “Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies,” is a response to a specific 1991 death of a newborn at the hands of her mother in Coney Island, New York, but it is more specifically a challenge to the sensationalistic *New York Times* article that depicted the event within a larger narrative of the self-destruction of the black community. Critical attention has, for the most part, focused on Wideman’s novels rather than his short fiction, and the few critics who discuss Wideman’s short fiction tend to overlook “Newborn.” This story, however, is worthy of more than a cursory glance or a quick reference within the larger scope of Wideman’s work. With “Newborn,” Wideman challenges the dismissive acceptance of black-on-black violence as an allegory for black self-destruction and instead provides a counter-narrative by giving voice to the experience of the infant falling down a garbage chute, who delineates the various systemic forms of oppression the black community faces. Furthermore, the position of the narrator and structure of the narrative itself allows Wideman to attempt to confront the concept of black social death and, perhaps most importantly,

to use this story as an example of how the narrative moment can be used to forestall or disrupt such social death. In this way, the story is more than a retelling of an event perceived by the public as horrific or shameful; it is also more than a simple critique of a racist narrative or a list of external forms of oppression. The story opens up to become an exploration of an ontological challenge facing the black community and a search for a productive way to confront that challenge.

Bio

Paul Blom is a PhD student and Teaching Fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Department of English and Comparative Literature, where he teaches courses in literature and in first-year writing. His research focuses on twentieth-century American literature and its intersections with health humanities, with a special concentration on literary trauma studies. He is currently the Fiction Editor for *The Carolina Quarterly* literary magazine and also writes scripts for promotional videos and short narrative or documentary films. His most recent publication is “Those Who Don’t Return: Improving Efforts to Address Tuberculosis Among Former Miners in Southern Africa,” which he co-wrote with Jonathan P. Smith and which appeared in *NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy* in May of 2019.