

**“Countdown to Zero’: Systemic Racial Oppression and Black Social Death in Wideman’s ‘Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies.’”** Invited to present paper at “Awakenings and Reckonings: Multiethnic Literature and Effecting Change—Past, Present, and Future,” at the 34<sup>th</sup> annual conference of **The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)**, in New Orleans, LA. April 2020. (Conference canceled—ultimately delayed and postponed rather than simply canceled—due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.)

**Note:** The conference was eventually held using the same overall themes, etc. in March 2022 in New Orleans, LA. This paper was eventually presented as part of the above panel in March 2022.

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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 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, a literary precursor to a critical and cultural discourse surrounding black social death that would begin to coalesce via the field of afro-pessimism just a few years later, culminating in such works as Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*.

### **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.