“COUNTDOWN TO ZERO”: SYSTEMIC RACIAL OPPRESSION AND BLACK SOCIAL DEATH IN WIDEMAN’S “NEWBORN THROWN IN TRASH AND DIES”

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ABSTRACT

Paul E. Blom: "Countdown to zero": Systemic Racial Oppression and Black Social Death in Wideman's "Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies"
(Under the direction of Jane Thrailkill)

John Edgar Wideman's 1992 short story, "Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies," is a response to the death of a newborn at the hands of her mother in Coney Island, New York and a challenge to the sensationalistic discourse surrounding black-on-black violence. With "Newborn," a mostly overlooked text within Wideman's fiction, Wideman challenges the dismissive acceptance of black-on-black violence as an allegory for black self-destruction and instead provides a counter-narrative in which he confronts the concept of black social death. The story provides 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.

To my late father, Michael Blom Sr., who always supported and encouraged my love of literature and language.

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I. INTRODUCTION

On Monday, August 12, 1991, a nineteen-year-old black woman named Melondie Cummings gave birth to a daughter on the stairwell between the tenth and eleventh floor of the Gerald J. Carey Gardens housing project in Coney Island, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Cummings cut the umbilical cord and deposited her newborn into the trash chute on the tenth floor, which emptied out into the trash compactor at the base of the building. Afterwards, she traveled to the Coney Island Hospital where she informed a social worker about her baby. Officials from the Housing Authority eventually discovered the dead body of the unnamed newborn in the trash compactor. On Wednesday, August 14, George James reported the story in *The New York Times* under the heading "Newborn Is Thrown in Trash and Dies."[1]

James's article is brief and sensational, voyeuristically focusing on the shocking spectacle of a dead infant discovered in a trash compactor. The headline itself is revealing as its passive language maintains its focus on the victim of the infanticide while the text of the article only briefly mentions the mother and her arrest. The mother is never quoted. Among the few people who do speak in the article, their quotations merely serve to communicate their horror in response to such a crime. The article itself is an example of a sensationalized approach to violence enacted upon black bodies, made more spectacularly deviant by the fact that the victim is an infant and the perpetrator is the infant's own mother.

[1] George James, "Newborn Is Thrown in Trash and Dies," in *The New York Times: National Edition*, 14 Aug. 1991, p. B03. An abbreviated version of this newspaper article also appeared in the *Associated Press* on August 14, 1991, identifying the mother as Melodie Cummings and stating her age as twenty-one rather than nineteen. Various textual details suggest Wideman relied on the *Times* account of this event. See Associated Press, "Newborn Baby Found in Brooklyn Garbage Chute," *AP News*, (2018, https://www.apnews.com/422cad37dd98b4c90edc152439bb3aad).

Aside from its sensationalistic approach, however, the article can be interpreted as representative of a common racist narrative that posits the perceived plight of the black community—a struggle with poverty, hyperfertility, negligent parenting, and crime—as self-induced. Such narratives tend to downplay or dismiss external sources of racial or socioeconomic oppression and laments the black community's supposed embrace of crime, drug use, gang violence, promiscuity, misogyny, high-risk sexual activity, and neglectful parenting, a narrative I will refer to as the narrative of "black self-destruction." The connection between such a narrative and James's newspaper article is especially reinforced by the specific events of this article, as it would seem to serve as a perfect example of this common narrative: an impoverished young mother in a housing project murders her own infant, an act that figures the destruction of a future generation, the negation of any future regeneration. A more fitting symbol for black self-destruction would be difficult to imagine.[2]

A year later, the black author John Edgar Wideman published his own narrative retelling of this true event in the short story he titled "Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies" in his 1992 collection of short fiction, *The Stories of John Edgar Wideman*.[3] Critical attention has, for the most part, focused on Wideman's novels rather than his short fiction. Keith E. Byerman's 1998 monograph *John Edgar Wideman: A Study of the Short Fiction* is currently the only extended

[2] For a few of the many examples of mainstream narratives of black self-destruction, see Michael Olesker, "Chavis Needs to Focus on Black Self-Destruction," *The Sun (1837-1993)*, (22 Aug. 1993), p. 2; or Bruce Frankel, "Jackson Crusade: End Black Self-Destruction," *USA TODAY (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, (28 Oct. 1993), p. 02A.

For a few examples of scholars or journalists critiquing or deconstructing such narratives, see, Dildra Martin-Ogburn, *Cultivating Supportive, Professional Relationships among Black Women in Educational Leadership: Shattering the Mirror of Self-Destruction*, (Florida Atlantic University, Ann Arbor, 2012); Donnie L. McMahand, *Quest for Blackness: Writing Against White Visioning and Black Self-Destruction*, (Tulane University, Ann Arbor, 2013); Malik Russell, "The Myth of Black Self-Destruction," *New York Beacon*, (11 Dec. 1996), p. 8; and Malik Russell, "The Myth of Black Self-Destruction: Part II," *New York Beacon*, (25 Dec. 1996), p. 9.

[3] The collection is now better known by the title under which it was rereleased in 1993, *All Stories Are True*.

discussion of Wideman's short fiction.[4] Most critics focus on Wideman's novels; the few critics who discuss Wideman's short fiction tend to mostly ignore "Newborn."[5] But this story 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 narrative of black self-destruction by creating a counter-narrative that gives voice to the previously voiceless object of voyeurism, the dead black infant. By providing this voice, Wideman lends density to the official narrative as it appears in the *Times*, eschewing the dismissive acceptance of black-on-black violence as an allegory for black self-destruction and instead exploring the experience of the falling infant. This experience allows Wideman to delineate the various systemic and institutional forms of oppression the black community faces, once again challenging the perception of the black community's inherent or cultural tendency toward self-destruction. Wideman's story, however, goes one step further than these concrete sources of racial oppression. The position of the narrator and structure of the narrative itself allows Wideman to attempt to confront or illustrate

[4] This claim is based on general observation of the critical discourse as well as a claim made by Keith E. Byerman, "John Edgar Wideman," (*Oxford Bibliographies*. 24 May 2018, doi: 10.1093/obo/9780199827251-0135).

[5] See Keith E. Byerman, *The Life and Work of John Edgar Wideman*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), which only briefly addresses Wideman's short fiction and never explicitly mentions "Newborn." See also D. Quentin Miller, *Understanding John Edgar Wideman*, (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2018), which ignores Wideman's short fiction until the final chapter, allocating about a single paragraph per individual story (113-31), including a single paragraph on "Newborn" (124). Similarly, Bonnie TuSmith and Keith E. Byerman, *Critical Essays on John Wideman*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006), focuses almost exclusively on Wideman's novels. Among the few pieces of short fiction specifically addressed in this collection of essays, "Newborn" is not included.

One exception is Keith E. Byerman, *John Edgar Wideman: A Study of the Short Fiction*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), which is obviously dedicated to an exploration of Wideman's short fiction pieces, the only extended exploration of his short fiction, in fact. This work, however, was published over twenty years ago and allocates only three pages to "Newborn," providing a rather simplified and cursory interpretation of the story (70-73). The most useful exception is Tracie Church Guzzio, "Deconstructing History: Trauma and the Auenation Narratives," in *All Stories Are True: History, Myth, and Trauma in the Work of John Edgar Wideman*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), pp. 48-97. Guzzio's book, which takes its name from the title of Wideman's collection of short fiction in which "Newborn" appears, explores both his novels and short fiction, but it still only briefly mentions "Newborn," albeit in a manner more useful than Byerman in that Guzzio draws parallels between "Newborn" and other similar works of Wideman's short fiction (88-89), although those connections are not especially pertinent to this current discussion of the story.

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 possibly disrupt—or at least forestall—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.

II. SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION AND BLACK SELF-DESTRUCTION

A simplistic and racist attempt to understand the events that transpired in Brooklyn on August 12, 1991 would rely on cultural narratives emphasizing the degradation of black mothers. Inspired by the article discussing the actual events, Wideman had a variety of options in structuring or framing this narrative, but he chooses to narrate it through the disposed child. In addition, he chooses to elude any direct reference to action on the part of the mother, refusing any attempt to valorize her or to examine what most might consider this woman's "deviancy," instead allowing room for an exploration of other factors or sources of motivation. Wideman is probably also well aware of the same fact that Dorothy Roberts laments regarding this nation's treatment of black female fertility and reproduction: "Blaming Black mothers for structural inequities has the added effect of obscuring the need for radical social change."[6] On a similar note, if Wideman had opted to write a more typical sentimental piece of short fiction focusing on the newborn as an innocent victim, the newborn's body would similarly obstruct the need for larger institutional changes. Any attempt to individualize this narrative would hinder Wideman's

[6] Dorothy Roberts. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. Second Vintage Books Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), p. 16.

larger project, to illustrate how such an event is a symptom of systemic oppression rather than a single act of deviancy, a symbol of black social death rather than a single aberrant act.

Rather than explore the psyche of the mother who ends the life of her newborn daughter, Wideman presents his story from the perspective of the newborn baby as she falls down the trash chute, narrating her experience as she falls. Her perspective, however, is enhanced, allowing her to be aware of the events transpiring on the floors around her and to articulate her experiences to the reader. The unnamed narrator's explanation for her insight is the first of many repudiations of a larger, commonly accepted narrative: "They say you see your whole life pass in review the instant before you die. How would *they* know. If you die after the instant replay, you aren't around to tell anybody anything. So much for they and what they say."[7] Throughout the story, the narrator makes numerous repudiations of such commonly accepted narratives or "what they say," the most significant of which exists in the narrator's abilities of perception and articulation. The story itself, the narrative production of this infant, functions as a critique of conventional interpretations of the world, which would include the narrative of the infant's own demise as it appears in the *Times*, narratives used to define, control, and oppress the black community.

The narrator explicitly references the real-world newspaper article that will chronicle her demise, even directly quoting the actual article itself (123), which invites the reader to revisit the actual newspaper article, forcing an intertextual engagement that requires one to compare the two narratives and note their different tactics and functions. After quoting the brief description of her mother dropping her down a garbage chute, the narrator then says, "And that's about it. What's fit to print. My tale in a nutshell followed by a relation of facts obtained by interview and reading official documents. Trouble is I could not be reached for comment. No one's fault" (123). Using

[7] John Edgar Wideman. "Newborn Thrown in Trash and Dies," in *The Stories of John Edgar Wideman*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), p. 120. All subsequent references to the text are cited parenthetically.

the *Times*'s own slogan against it,[8] Wideman's infant narrator criticizes the *Times* article for its sensationalistic and reductionist approach to her demise, an article that simplifies a complex sociocultural event to one mother's deviancy, all wrapped up with official narratives via the police and government documents.

The narrator presents a similar critique as she begins describing each floor past which she descends. She describes floor ten in terms of conventional predictions and the claims "they" make, especially in reference to stories like her own: "They never stop talking so percentages guarantee they'll be correct sometimes. Especially since they speak out of both sides of their mouths at once: *Birds of a feather flock together. Opposites attract*. Like the billion billion monkeys at typewriters who sooner or later will bang out this story I think is uniquely mine" (122). The unnamed narrator critiques the supposed facts of those in power, whose words become concretized in aphorisms and widely accepted fact despite their obvious discrepancies.

Later in the narrative, the reader will confront the fact that a tale such as this is not as unique as one might like to think, explaining that "in 1990 nine discarded babies were discovered in New York City's garbage. As of August of this year [1991] seven have been found. 911 is the number to call if you find a baby in the trash" (123). How can one fit such deaths into one's comfortable vision of the world? In *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts discusses racist ideology that perpetuated notions of black inferiority and the tendency of the black community towards self-destruction: "These disparaging stereotypes of Black people all proclaim a common message: it is the depraved, self-perpetuating character of Blacks themselves that leads to their

[8] The first recorded appearance of the phrase "fit to print" is as part of the slogan for *The New York Times*: "All the News That's Fit to Print," a slogan that first appeared on October 25, 1896 and was designed by Adolph Simon Ochs. Ochs, who encouraged comprehensive journalism, intended the slogan as a critique of sensationalistic journalism and dishonest or tasteless advertisements in other newspapers. The *Times* slogan continues to appear on its masthead today (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.).

inferior social status."[9] Do birds of a feather truly flock together? Is there some inherent disposition toward self-annihilation that drives black mothers to mistreat or destroy their own offspring, as common racial narratives would suggest? Or do opposites indeed attract? Are the individuals who discard their infants actually disparate, reacting to a variety of nuanced societal factors that attempt to homogenize and control them, reducing them based on a single aspect of their identity? Wideman allows his narrator to explore the microcosmic world of the black community to examine the systemic forms of oppression that might lead a young mother to dispose of her newborn into a garbage chute. The narrator's mistrust of what "they" say is just the beginning, but it sets a foundation for a critique of the institutions that create, control, and define these characters' worlds: "The law here is the same one ruling the jungle, they say…. But you know what I think about what they say" (122). Early on, then, one can see this short story as a rejection of the overtly racist ideology that attempts to reduce and control the black community, reducing members of that community to the level of the bestial.

As the narrator tumbles through the garbage chute, she describes the events taking place on each floor she passes during her descent. In this way, the narrative of her fall becomes a description of the entire housing project building, itself a microcosm for the black community's precarious position within a series of systems of oppression. The forms of systemic oppression appear through the narrator's delineation of floors she passes where there exist instances of drug use, illicit and desperate gambling, sexual violence and molestation, fractured families, and gang violence. In her descriptions, the narrator locates these failings as responses to socioeconomic and societal pressures placed upon this building's inhabitants.

[9] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, p. 9.

Combining her observations of gambling and drug abuse, for instance, the narrator categorizes both as forms of addiction, a desperate hope for a better life amidst socioeconomic and interpersonal struggles that originate from outside this community. The narrator observes, "Very little new wealth enters this cluster of buildings that are like high-rise covered wagons circled against the urban night, so what's here is cycled and recycled by games of chance, by murder and other violent forms of exchange" (122). The language here envisions this housing project as wagons encircled defensively in a world of enemies while also implying the economic pressures that motivates the events in this building. Her language also equates "games of chance" with "murder and other violent forms of exchange," suggesting that, in this context, bodies are commodities or vehicles for some form of transmission rather than vehicles for individuality.

Wideman posits the addictive behaviors of violence, gambling, and drug abuse as all originating from socioeconomic pressures rather than individual failings, pressures that cause and are, in turn, exacerbated by, these deviant behaviors. Her mentions of drug addiction in the building call to mind such studies as those by Rashad Shabazz, who notes that the war on drugs is specifically targeted against the black community with devastating results, especially on black men.[10] Mass incarceration leads to a destabilization of the community, including destabilizing the normative family unit and encouraging other high-risk practices. Inmates returning to society face low job prospects, unstable homes, isolation, depression, drug abuse, and high-risk sexual behaviors.[11] Socioeconomic pressures, combined with a racially driven governmental prosecution of black urban populations, therefore leads to mass incarceration, high-risk behavior,

[10] Rashad Shabazz, "Ghost Mapping: The Geography of Risk in Black Chicago," in *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), p. 102-103.

[11] Shabazz, "Ghost Mapping," p. 107.

and health complications. Cathy Cohen's observations regarding the inequities in access to healthcare are cogent, revealing drastic disparities in access to healthcare for people of color, as a result not just from economic barriers but also from regulations and surveillance measures designed by such governmental agencies as the CDC.[12] The very premise of the story, a mother's disposal of her newborn child, might seem to display some form of social deviancy but can actually be read as a critique of inequitable access to healthcare. According to Dorothy Roberts, black women are "the most likely to have an unintended pregnancy" and "because they are disproportionately cash poor and face a host of structural barriers to accessing reproductive health services, are more likely to be deterred by restrictive abortion laws—and to risk injury and death as a result, both from unsafe pregnancies and unsafe abortions."[13] Both the premise for the narrative and the events recounted throughout the narrative accuse institutional forms of oppression as the catalyst for perceived acts of black "deviancy."

This single building through which the narrator falls can be read as a microcosm for the black community, and the narrator's exploration of its residents creates an examination of the oppressive systemic forces facing this community and the black community in general. While one must avoid essentializing an entire community or ignoring individual or even communal agency, Wideman creates a powerful narrative that seeks to undermine common narratives that essentialize an entire people just as egregiously and dismiss or downplay the societal context in which these individuals exist. As the narrator falls past the fourth floor, what she labels the "Floor of Power," she leaves no doubt as to the source of the entropy and seeming self-destruction plaguing the housing project, and thus the black community in general: "El

[12] Cathy Cohen, "All the Black People Fit to Print," in *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 183.

[13] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, p. xiv.

Presidente inhabits this floor. Some say he owns the whole building. He believes he owns it, collects rent, treats the building and its occupants with contempt. He is a bold-faced man…. This floor is entirely white. A floury, cracked white some say used to gleam. El Presidente is white also. Except for the pink dome of his forehead" (126). This superintendent who mistakenly claims ownership of the building serves as an obvious stand-in for the white power structure that seeks to control and delimit the residents of the black community. According to the narrator, "his job is keeping things in the building as they are, squatting on the floor of power like a broken generator or broken furnace or broken heart, occupying the space where one that works should be" (126). Here, Wideman personifies institutional racism and oppression in the form of El Presidente whose role is to maintain the status quo, a condition which arrives in the imagery of broken and run-down machinery. If his role is to maintain the current state of squalor, the specific items used in the narrator's simile are telling in that the broken generator, furnace, and heart imply that systemic oppression seeks to deny members of the black community power, regeneration, warmth, or even compassion.

Even the narrator's attempt to imagine a life that could have been still involves scenes of violence, pain, and deviancy. Passing "the Floor of Love," her imagined relationship with her parents begins nicely enough but eventually transforms into a scene in which her father sexually molests her, and her mother beats her when the girl tries to confront her mother about the experience (127). As D. Quentin Miller laments, Wideman's tale "cycles between an almost romantic sentimentality about the life not lived and its opposite: the possibilities that this life will include brutal victimization and sorrow."[14] Even as the story critiques the racist narrative of black self-destruction, it also critiques any romantic notion that would sentimentalize this

[14] D. Quentin Miller, *Understanding John Edgar Wideman*, p. 124.

narrator's potential life through such references as the inevitable suffering she would have endured if she had not been disposed of by her mother. Whether falling through a garbage chute or surviving to be molested, beaten, and eventually falling victim to some "other violent forms of exchange" (122), the narrator is doomed to brutal suffering.

This inevitability is displayed by the death of the narrator's stepbrother Tommy near the close of the story: "My stepbrother Tommy was playing in the schoolyard and they shot him dead. Bang. Bang. Gang banging and poor Tommy caught a cap in his chest" (127). As the narrator rushes closer and closer to her demise at the base of the building, she witnesses grieving community members visiting her family, but amidst this grief, Wideman also presents the vehicle through which this inevitable cycle of violence will continue. The narrator observes Tommy's "boys bop through the door. They know who hit Tommy. They know tomorrow what they must do" (128). Even those residents who are not discarded still seem destined to experience violence and premature death. The text posits this inevitability of black suffering to broach the ontological problem of black social death.

III. AN INEVITABLE COUNTDOWN: BLACK SOCIAL DEATH

The story itself is structured as a "countdown to zero" (120) in which the narrator recounts the events transpiring on each floor, one by one, as she tumbles down the garbage chute. As the narrative progresses, the narrator is one floor closer to the bottom. Narrative progression is a movement downwards, towards certain death. The narrator makes the inevitability of her death all too clear: "I can speak to you now only because I haven't reached the bottom yet" (120). The inclusion of the word "yet" leaves no room for an alternate narrative. From the moment this story begins, the moment at which this narrator's mother disposes of her

into the garbage chute, this story's end has already been written. The narrator's language is filled with references to fate and inevitability. Explaining to the reader how she is able to perceive everything taking place in the building around her, she says, "You get the whole thing [one's life] handed to you, neatly packaged as you begin. Then you forget it. Or try to forget. Live your life as if it hasn't happened before, as if the tape has not been prepunched full of holes, the die cast" (121). Here, life is pre-packaged from beginning to end, and one's destiny has already been determined. Such notions of fate and determinism can be read as a result of the systemic forms of oppression, but they can also be read as suggestive of the social death plaguing all black bodies, a concept Wideman attempts to illustrate through his narrator and narrative structure.

The cultural and socioeconomic disenfranchisement of the black community results from systemic and institutional forms of oppression, but these institutions are actually manifestations of an even deeper problem, what Orlando Patterson first termed "social death." In his groundbreaking work, Patterson explores the ontological position of the slave whose powerlessness "always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death."[15] Patterson also notes that "because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson" or "a socially dead person."[16] Because the slave was "alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. All slaves experienced, at the very least, a secular excommunication,"[17] what he later refers to as "the slave's social death, the outward

[15] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 5.

[16] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 5.

[17] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 5.

conception of his natal alienation."[18] This "natal alienation" refers to "the loss of ties of birth in generations both ascending and descending"[19] in which the slave "ceased to belong independently to any formally recognized community,"[20] a characteristic that was, crucially, "perpetual and inheritable."[21] Cut off from his or her ancestors or descendants, existing only through his or her master, the slave is removed from any formally recognized social order, the result of which is what Patterson termed "the essence of slavery," that "the slave, in his social death, lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death, the sacred and the secular. Already dead, he lives outside the mana of the gods and can cross the boundaries with social and supernatural impunity."[22]

This social death, however, transcends the position of the slave in the United States, lingering as an ontological problem for the black community long after emancipation, or perhaps predating and superseding slavery altogether. Robert Westley posits that social death precedes, causes, is exacerbated by, and outlasts the specific institution of slavery: "We might say that inferior status functions as an explanation of both slavery's cause and its effect: its justification and its mode of enforcement, the means by which it secures its institutional power and the way it perpetuates its legacy. Simply put, hereditary social degradation is slavery's life and afterlife."[23]

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[18] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 8.

[19] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 7.

[20] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 6.

[21] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 9.

[22] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 51.

[23] Robert Westley, "The Accursed Share: Genealogy, Temporality, and the Problem of Value in Black Reparations Discourse," in *Reparations*, (vol. 92, no. 1, 2005), p. 127.

In a similar vein, Frank Wilderson argues that "there is no narrative moment prior to slavery"[24] and that there is no true "distinction between Slaveness and Blackness,"[25] defining blackness as "always already void of relationality,"[26] persisting in a state of subjugation and abjection.[27] Christina Sharpe makes a similar claim for the continued subjection of black bodies in America, positing that "slavery was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity" within a pervasive climate of antiblack sentiment and policy.[28] Ultimately, according to Sharpe, "The means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain."[29] Meanwhile, Jared Sexton explores the way in which black bodies exist outside of any legitimized form of social relations, defined as devoid of honor or worth: "Black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage…. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space."[30] If slavery persists, albeit in a different less recognizable form, then the social death Patterson explores as a result or precursor to slavery also still persists. This ontological problem, the problem of existing in a liminal space beyond legitimized forms of relation, poses a challenge towards representation or productive reaction. Calvin Warren asks, "When investigating black ~~being~~, we are ultimately asking, how

[24] Frank Wilderson, "Introduction: Unspeakable Ethics," in *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, (Duke University Press, 2010), p. 27.

[25] Wilderson, "Introduction," p. 11.

[26] Wilderson, "Introduction," p. 17.

[27] Wilderson, "Introduction," p. 10. See also Frank Wilderson, "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation," in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, (Minneapolis: Racked & Dispatched, 2017), p. 18.

[28] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 104.

[29] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p. 12.

[30] Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," in *InTensions*, no. 5, Fall/Winter 2011, p. 28.

do you represent that which lacks a place (and not just a literal referent)? What, exactly, is placed there—the illegitimate place?"[31]

Wideman's structure of "Newborn," however, seems to be an attempt to confront this challenge. The narrator, a newborn falling down a garbage chute and caught in a liminal space between newly discovered life and imminent death, perfectly embodies this concept of black social death. The moment this nameless narrator was born, she was discarded down her building's garbage chute, and as she narrates, her arrival to the basement and her death are inevitable, suggesting that all black bodies, from the moment they enter this world, are destined for death or are already in the process of dying.[32] Again, the liminal space this narrator occupies is one between birth and death. The narrator's tumbling body seems to presage Warren's observation that "black ~~being~~ is an always already dead thing, and this thing is worldless…. The black body is just an encasing for a primordial death (the destruction of the flesh, thanatology). The black body, then, is a breathing tomb—a corporeal casket, containing a primordial death."[33] Indeed, Christina Sharpe makes a similar claim in her discussion of black lives existing in the legacy of slavery: "To be Black is to be continually produced by the wait toward death; that the cradle and the grave double as far as Black flesh is concerned."[34]

The imagery of the fall itself, however, is especially significant when attempting to illustrate this ontological challenge of black social death, an experience that is more than being

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[31] Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 145.

[32] Although the fact that all humans are destined for death from the moment of birth—that life is a process of slowly dying— is a common observation, this story's specific positioning of the narrator and structure of the narrative presents a different, more immediate version of this sentiment, and its sense of immediacy lends to an increased sense of inevitability.

[33] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, p. 113.

[34] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p. 87.

always already dead or existing both within and outside of the world. This liminality is also apparent in a certain sense of chaos or instability. Discussing the impossibility of black being, Warren refers to the Greek sense of "being" as a form of "constancy" or "standing forth," to argue that "in an antiblack world, such standing forth, or emerging/becoming, is obliterated…[through] the systemic concealment, descent, and withholding of blackness through technologies of terror, violence, and abjection. To exist, as black, is to inhabit a world through permanent 'falling.'"[35] Wideman uses a narrator existing not only in a liminal space between life and death but also presents her entire narration during a freefall. Although she experiences a kind of metaphysical expansion of the senses, able to observe and describe the events taking place throughout the building through which she falls, she makes no reference to her immediate surroundings, the dark shaft she descends. She exists within the garbage chute but has no point of reference during her plunge; she observes what takes place throughout the building but cannot physically access those events from her position within the chute. This ever-falling narrator seems to predict the way Warren would grapple with this concept years later.

On one level, this narrator tumbling towards death can be read as a figure for the inevitability of black social death, a black body destined for destruction from the moment of her birth, figuring black bodies as waste to be discarded, black bodies always dying from a liminal space, not fully part of or separate from the world they inhabit. The imagery of the garbage chute, however, creates a second manner in which the narration negates black life. The narrator's act of falling down the chute and towards a trash compactor parallels a reversal of her birth just moments before. It is as though the narrative is an enactment of some return to the womb; the death of the newborn is codified almost as a negation of the birth, as though this living, breathing

[35] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, p. 13.

body can be returned to the womb, as though her birth and conception can be undone, negating the ability of black reproduction at all. In this sense, the building serves not just as a microcosm for the black community but also as a metonym for the female black body in which the garbage chute and trash compactor function as birth canal and womb respectively. If the building is the black female body, then such a conflation reiterates the impossibility of productive black motherhood. However, if the building is also the entire black community, here figured as a black mother disposing of garbage rather than producing a new generation, Wideman's narration suggests the impossibility of any form of productive black (re)generation.

If the narrator's descent through the trash chute and into the compactor can be read as a reverse birthing, a return to the womb, then this metaphorical return to the womb necessitates another birth, suggestive of the inevitability of black social death via cycles of violence and systemic racism. The birth is reversed or negated, only to be reenacted via a third party, an agent of the government, who will discover the narrator's corpse: "Ernesto Mundez, forty-four, a Housing Authority caretaker, will notice my head, shoulders and curly hair in a black plastic trash bag he slashes open near the square entrance of the trash compactor on the ground floor of this brown-brick public housing project" (123). If the trash compactor can be read as the womb, then the image of this official slashing his way into a garbage bag to discover the infant's corpse enacts a C-section of a stillborn child. The current power structures, it seems, will not allow the mother in this narrative to negate her child's birth. The child must be discovered and brought to light even if—or perhaps because—the child is already dead. This moment of slashing through the garbage bag, tearing through the veil, reveals the truth Wideman wishes to illustrate: black bodies are dead not just from the moment of birth; they are dead from the moment of conception. Perhaps, at least metaphorically, all black bodies are stillborn?

Is there a way to confront such a notion of black social death productively? According to David Marriott, from whom Warren borrowed the image of instability and falling as a metaphor for the ontological problem of social death, "These falls are unending, and precisely because they fall into nothing…these falls inaugurate nothing but waiting, a story of non-event, an event of nothing which both calls for and annuls repetition."[36] Wideman, however, attempts to transform this "non-event" into an event, something that can be narrated, illustrating this perpetual state of black social death and confronting it in a productive manner. Within this story, after all, the act of narrating—producing a narrative text—is an act of survival, of staving off one's demise. The end of the story, the narrator's silence, does not cause her death; her silence signals her death for the reader. Any written text tends to conflate concepts of space and time. When readers refer to "how long" a particular author spends describing a particular event, concept, or character, the actual referent is the amount of words or how much space on the page is used for such a description. The more words or space used, the longer it will take the reader to read and process such material. Wideman, however, conflates space and time even more, in that the newborn's countdown to death is formulated as a numeration and exploration of each floor she passes. Wideman can choose to allow the narrator more space to describe any given floor, therefore delaying the reader's arrival to the conclusion of the story, the narrator's death. At one point, the narrator observes, "My time is different from this time" (128), an admission of the ways in which temporality is being stretched to make room for this narrative and delay annihilation.

Similarly, the device of the craps game taking place within the building conflates talking with luck and survival. As the newborn repeats the words being spoken by those playing craps as she falls past, she repeats a number of different colloquial craps phrases before saying, "Talk to

[36] David Marriot, "Waiting to Fall," in *CR: The New Centennial Review*, (vol. 13, no. 3, Winter 2013), p. 214. Qtd. in Warren, *Ontological Terror*, p. 13.

me, baby. Talk. Talk. Please. Please. Please" (122). The gambler's address to the dice as he pleads for a good roll conflates the dice with "baby," a pet name or term of endearment but also a term that immediately calls to mind the baby observing these events from the vantage point of imminent death in the trash chute nearby. In this brief line, the narrator becomes conflated with dice as the gambler begs the dice to "Talk to me," a request that conflates the baby's narration with the gambler's fiscal success, a chance to survive the current game. To "talk" is to allow for survival. In the case of this story, this countdown, as long as the narrator continues to speak, as long as the story delays its inevitable end, then the narrator continues to live.

This atypical approach to temporality presents a potential tactic for confronting social death. Robert Westley argues that the cultural logic of devaluing black bodies in America has an inertia that cannot be sufficiently confronted by "ordinary politics" or typical "temporal frameworks."[37] Similarly, in his discussion of tactics for countering the legacy of slavery, Gregory Laski discusses a variety of approaches including "the reconfiguration of time, the unsettling of the standard relationship among past, present and future."[38] It seems, then, that the only way to make space to transform a "non-event" into an event, the only way to give voice to those who are always already dead, is to reconfigure time and space to forestall such annihilation long enough to create a narrative exploration of one's ontological position.

The act of talking, of telling one's own story, is an act of ontological survival, offering the best chance of overcoming social death. Calvin Warren laments that "the free black can speak but cannot be heard,"[39] which amounts to a kind of externally imposed silence. The

[37] Westley, "The Accursed Share," p. 82.

[38] Gregory Laski, "Making Reparations; or, How to Count the Wrongs of Slavery," in *Untimely Democracy: The Politics of Progress After Slavery*, (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 95.

[39] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, p. 164.

narrator points to a similar silence when critiquing the newspaper article reporting her death in which she "could not be reached for comment" (123). As she continues to fall, she ruminates on the newspaper article that will be written about her death once more. Her response reveals the motivation for her narrative: "I want my voice to be part of the record. The awful silence is not truly broken until we speak for ourselves…. In the quiet dark of my passage I did not cry out. Now I will not be still" (124). Her language here equates silence with inaction, therefore equating her speech act, the construction of this narrative, with action or resistance. To thrust one's own voice into the silence is to resist that very silence.

IV. CONCLUSION

The entire narrative is an attempt to slow down time, to make room to meditate on and forestall social death, room to speak, to break the silencing such social death creates. Such an attempt is what Fred Moten refers to as the "fugitive movement," which he defines as "a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure. This fugitive movement is stolen life, and its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression."[40] Moten's definition and its reference to breaking enclosures calls to mind several images present in the text such as the notion of birth as well as the narrator's expanded powers of observation and articulation, which allow her to see beyond the garbage chute and to speak beyond her own darkness and silence. Moten asks, "Can there be an escape from that location; can the personhood that defines that location also escape that position? What survives the kind of escape that ought never leave the

[40] Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," in *Criticism*, (vol. 50, no. 2, Spring 2008), pp. 179.

survivor intact?"[41] Wideman's narrative seems to answer this question. By creating space for a narrative moment, his narrator briefly escapes her position, delaying her demise, making room for an illustration of her predicament and the situation of her entire community. Her narrative survives her death, filling the silence of black social death with her own voice. Through this narrative moment, to use Moten's words, "the dead are alive and escaping."[42]

Wideman's story, by undermining racist narratives and their underlying ideologies, by exploring the institutional forms of oppression that shape and influence the lives in this microcosmic housing project, and by providing a voice to this unnamed narrator, attempts to illustrate the ontological problem of black social death. By making time to present this illustration, Wideman suggests that, although this problem might be inevitable, perhaps it can be forestalled in productive ways. The unnamed narrator is doomed from the first word; her story is always already a "countdown to zero," but she can delay her demise by creating a narrative area in which time and space are conflated and altered, articulating her own story in a tacit challenge to conventional narratives of black self-destruction and to the problem of social death itself.

[41] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," p. 208.
[42] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," p. 212.

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